

# EDGE

THE FUTURE OF ENTERTAINMENT

## FOR T SOLIS

"WE'RE TRYING TO  
CREATE A NEUTRON STAR,  
NOT A BLACK HOLE"  
**TROY BAKER**

### TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

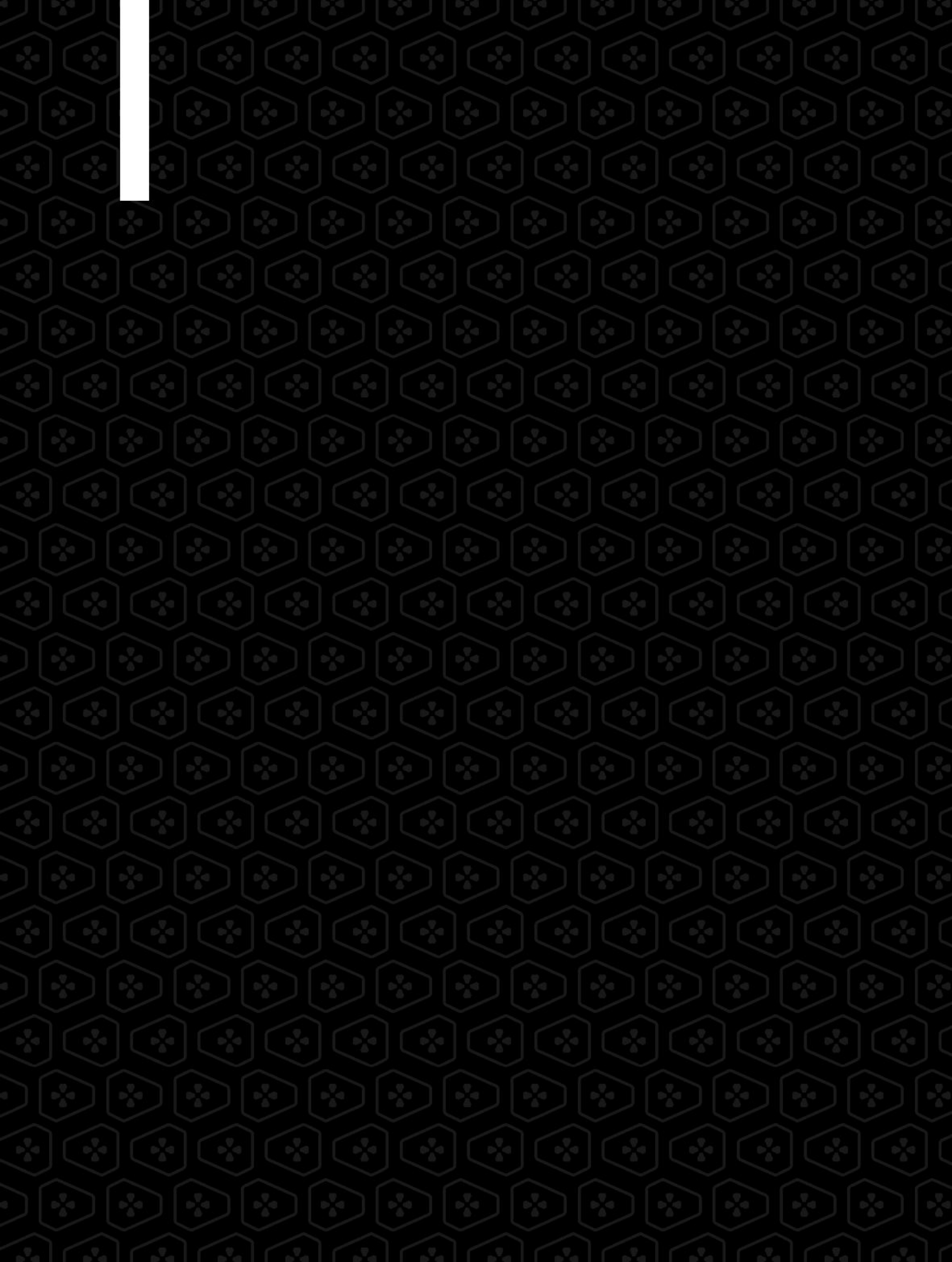
DOES EXPANDING THE  
SANDBOX MAKE ZELDA  
A GREATER ADVENTURE?

**#385**

JULY 2023

### PLUS

FIXING FRAMERATES  
POST TRAUMA  
THE FUTURE OF  
ASYMMETRIC DESIGN  
BLOODBORNE





# Turns out Atari had the right idea about this all along

In the old days, when videogame consoles were styled to look as though they were made partly out of wood, we didn't worry about framerates too much. We didn't have to. The most popular console of the era, 1977's Atari VCS, generated its visuals in such a way that they sort of *had* to run at 60fps, and the entire gaming community benefited by not being distracted by tedious arguments over which version of the newest game managed to fit in two or three more frames per second than the other. In the arcades, the original *Star Wars* coin-op of 1983 even managed to display full-blown 3D fluidly – in colour, no less. Back then, we didn't consider a future when games weren't presented smoothly. They could only improve from this point onwards, right? That's just logic.

Wrong. The problems began to arrive when we decided that wireframe 3D just wouldn't do, and that we really should be thinking about filling in all those empty spaces between the lines with *stuff*. And so began the transition to filled 3D, as exemplified in Atari's *Hard Drivin'*, a game whose juddery polygonal world pretty much invited you to make a cup of tea as you waited for the next frame of action to be drawn on the screen. In the home, the Freespace 3D series proved similarly traumatic. Frankly, it sometimes felt that we should be talking in terms of spf rather than fps.

To paraphrase Jurassic Park's Dr Ian Malcolm, our developers were so preoccupied with whether or not they could create complex 3D games that they didn't stop to think if they should. And so here we are, all these years later, living with a generation of consoles we were assured would be the one to once again deliver 60fps as a performance baseline – and fails at it too often. In Knowledge (p8), we invite a selection of developers into the great modern framerate debate, and consider what happens next.

Our cover feature focuses on story rather than hard technical issues – which isn't to say that Fallen Leaf's *Fort Solis*, starring Troy Baker and Roger Clark, skimps on visuals. The journey to Mars begins on p50.



Exclusive subscriber edition



# games

## Hype

- 30 **Post Trauma**  
PC, consoles TBA
- 34 **Anger Foot**  
PC
- 38 **Silica**  
PC
- 40 **Astronaut:  
The Best**  
PC
- 42 **The Cosmic Wheel  
Sisterhood**  
PC, Switch
- 44 **Nighthawks**  
PC
- 46 **Hype roundup**



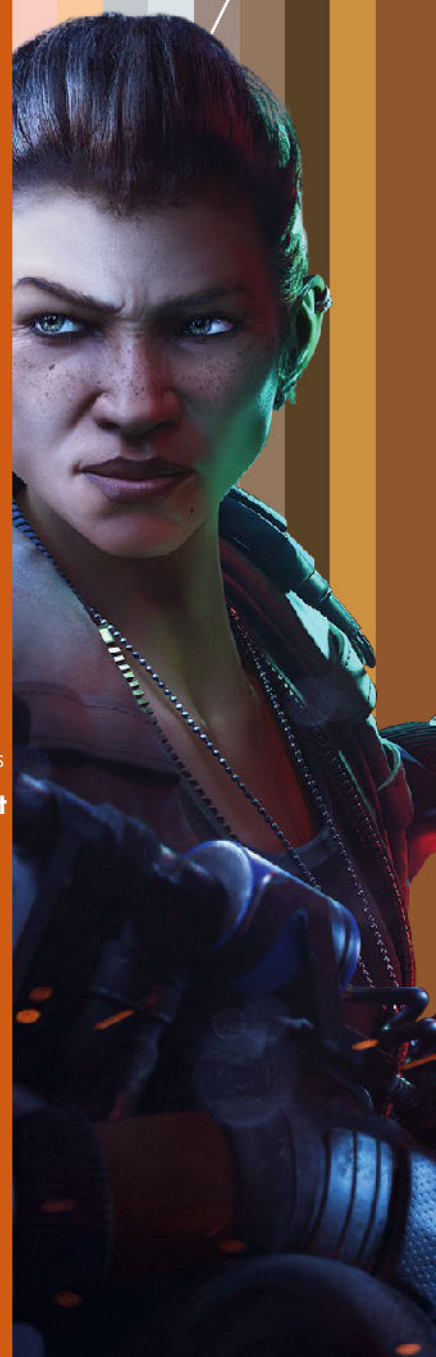
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edition of Edge for  
additional content



Follow these links  
throughout the magazine  
for more content online

## Play

- 98 **The Legend Of Zelda:  
Tears Of The Kingdom**  
Switch
- 102 **Redfall**  
PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 106 **Star Wars Jedi: Survivor**  
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 110 **Humanity**  
PC, PS4, PS5, PSVR, PSVR2
- 112 **Planet Of Lana**  
PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 114 **Darkest Dungeon II**  
PC
- 116 **The Last Case Of  
Benedict Fox**  
PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 118 **Minecraft Legends**  
PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 120 **Horizon: Forbidden West  
– Burning Shores**  
PS5
- 121 **Mr Sun's Hatbox**  
PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
- 122 **Tron: Identity**  
PC, Switch





124

#385

# sections

JULY 2023



78

## Knowledge

### 8 Performance anxieties

Why are game developers struggling to achieve 60fps?

### 12 Dependable independents

ID@Xbox at ten: founder Chris Charla reflects on its successes

### 14 Changing the narrative

Five years of taking videogame stories seriously at LudoNarraCon

### 16 Pixel craft

Videogame-inspired embroidery from French artist Marine Beauflis

### 18 Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls, featuring Tim Sweeney

### 20 This Month On Edge

The things that caught our eye during the production of **E385**

## Dispatches

### 22 Dialogue

**Edge** readers share their opinions; one wins an exclusive T-shirt

### 24 Trigger Happy

Steven Poole asks if games can become a misinformation vaccine

### 26 Alternate Reality

Cocktails and cabinets: Adrian Hon samples the modern arcade

## Features

### 50 Seeking Solis

How a small studio in Liverpool is aiming to deliver TV-quality drama in the tense sci-fi thriller *Fort Solis*

### 68 Divide And Conquer

Insights into the unique appeal of asymmetric multiplayer games from the developers behind them

### 78 Fear The Old Blood

Why the distinctive magic of FromSoftware's *Bloodborne* still endures, eight years on

### 86 The Making Of...

Sleights-of-hand delivered with Kubrickian elegance: how *Card Shark* tricked us all

### 92 Studio Profile

The team behind mobile hit *Armello* on the advantages of becoming a two-project studio

### 124 Time Extend

How Ice-Pick Lodge's esoteric sandbox RPG *Pathologic 2* became horrifyingly prescient

### 129 The Long Game

Getting tangled up once more in Japan's capital with *Ghostwire: Tokyo*'s Spider's Thread expansion



50



EDGE



68



# EDGE

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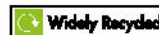
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# Performance anxieties

Why are developers **failing to deliver 60fps** from hardware that promised to hit the mark?

Cast your mind back to 2020. As Sony and Microsoft promote their forthcoming consoles, which in some respects seem to represent the smallest graphical leap yet between generations, one feature stands out among all the talk of SSD storage and ray-traced reflections: a move to 60fps. Some games will even run in 120fps on these new machines, we're told, a feat beyond even many gaming PCs when it comes to running contemporary blockbusters. With such assurances in place, it was easy to imagine that this smooth, fluid gameplay would characterise the next generation.

In 2023, then, there was a certain dissonance to the news that *Redfall* would launch in its Xbox Series incarnation with only a 30fps 'quality' mode, its 60fps 'performance' mode arriving at some point down the line. This, after all, is one of Microsoft's big console exclusives for the year, and one of the first fruits born of its 2021 acquisition of Bethesda: why wouldn't it be a poster child for the hardware's capabilities?

In truth, however, *Redfall* is far from alone, joining the ranks of numerous 30fps releases of recent months, including *A Plague Tale: Requiem* and *Gotham Knights*. Just because it says '60fps' somewhere on a console's spec sheet, clearly that doesn't mean every game will happily follow suit.

And yet optimising for consoles has been a long-standing challenge. Game development is by definition an iterative process, and certainties such as framerate performance have always tended to emerge at the 11th hour. Two generations ago, a more modest 30fps



FROM TOP Milestone creative director Michele Caletti, Ubisoft Massive lead engine programmer Gregor Ehrenstein, and Remedy director of technology Mika Vehkala

was the target for most developers – and even then it wasn't always delivered. But expectations change along with technology, and talk of framerates has never been noisier than it is today.

Perhaps this is because, as Remedy communications director **Thomas Puha** suggests, playing games at 60fps opens a box you can never close again: "*Destiny* is a good example. When Bungie [released] their 60fps upgrade after like five years at 30fps, it was mind-blowing: 'Oh, *this* is how this can feel'." Before experiencing *Destiny* at 60fps, most players didn't have a problem with the original's lower – but nevertheless solid – framerate. But once you've had a taste, Puha says, "There's no going back to 30 after that."

**Two and a half** years into the lifecycle of the current console generation, there have undoubtedly been enough releases on PS5 and Xbox Series X with higher framerates that most players have had the opportunity to experience and appreciate the difference between 60 and 30. If this new tranche of games that don't meet the promise seems like a step backward, it's worth considering some of the possible reasons behind the early glut of 60fps releases.

The prolonged supply-chain issues brought about by 2020's global tumult meant that next-gen userbases grew far slower than expected, leading to an extended cross-generational overlap phase. Developers with major projects

under way at the time were wise to hedge their bets and release on both generations – and, if you've optimised for the previous generation, hitting 60fps on hardware with vastly more throughput is an easier ask.

"The leap to gen-nine [consoles] allowed us to hit 60fps solidly on many of our titles," confirms **Michele Caletti**, creative director and executive producer at Milanese racing specialist Milestone Interactive. It's worth noting that only now, with *Ride 5*, due in August, is the studio gearing up to make its first game

exclusively for the current generation of consoles. And its specialism is important to consider, too, since the effects of 60fps are not universally impactful – the fluidity of a higher framerate makes itself felt much more in some experiences and genres than others.

"It gives a quicker response, a slicker feeling in the game," Caletti says of 60fps. "It is basically an industry standard, at least for racing games. I think that very few people would trade 60fps for a 30fps 'quality' mode for a racing game." But framerate isn't the only way to convey a sense of speed or fluidity of control in a racing game – other techniques, such as motion blur or changing the field of view, can help to achieve the same effect. How much they can be deployed, Caletti adds, depends on where the racing game sits on the arcade/simulation spectrum. "The more simulation-oriented ►

"I think that very few people would trade 60fps for a 30fps 'quality' mode for a racing game"



*Redfall* can throw up surprisingly twitchy battles, which makes the absence of a 60fps mode at launch all the more conspicuous







Mike Grier, CCO at Ember Lab, and Thomas Puha, communications director at Remedy

the game is, the less you can play with the camera and the blur, because sim games need a stable field of view." It's not just a matter of the intended effect on players, either – a game's genre can define how technically feasible it is to achieve high framerates.

**Gregor Ehrenstein** is lead engine programmer for Ubisoft's Snowdrop engine, used in everything from *The Division* to the *Mario + Rabbids* games, as well as the forthcoming *Avatar: Frontiers Of Pandora*. Ehrenstein is a specialist in performance, and stresses that not all games are equal. "With a rally racing game, for instance, you can control very precisely how much it costs to render the racetrack, and you would not need to update any AI for other cars," he says. "In this case, it would be easier to reach 120Hz." At the opposite end of the spectrum are experiences with "many NPCs and complex animation systems", where the amount of data is higher, so naturally the cost per frame increases too. "Relevant to the current generation of consoles," Ehrenstein adds, "is also how much you want to allocate to realistic lighting. Specifically if you want to do ray tracing, for example."

**Everyone we talk** to on the topic agrees that, for a project to stand any realistic chance of hitting 60fps at launch, the entire team needs to be aligned at an early stage to establish that goal, and committed to it throughout development. "That conversation should definitely happen as early as possible in pre-production to set the team up for success," says Ember Lab CEO **Mike Grier**. Yet in the case of Ember's 2021 debut, *Kena: Bridge Of Spirits*, he admits, that talk came later than would have been ideal, since it was only possible once the game was confirmed to be shipping on PS5. "Luckily, we were able to adjust during the course of production to deliver at 60fps in our performance mode," Grier concludes.

This might make it sound like a simple process, but, as Remedy technical director **Mika Vehkala** says, the reality is anything but. It's common to agree "very early in the conception [stage]" on 60fps



Remedy's revamped iteration of *Control*, aka the Ultimate Edition, introduced a performance mode that runs at 60fps across PS5 and Xbox Series – albeit at a lower resolution on the relatively underpowered Series S

as a target, he says. "The problem in my experience is that this is actually not something people consciously discuss during long development cycles. It's more like: 'Let's see how it goes'. We tend to focus on making games look great and building awesome gameplay features."

Ultimately, game studios are collectives of creators who want to see what's possible in a constantly advancing digital ecosystem. This is evident in Remedy's output: games from a relatively small team whose visuals can nonetheless compete with the biggest productions. But from a technical perspective, this can create challenges, as Vehkala explains: "At every stage, every day when you're making things, somebody's planning a new level, and an environment artist's figuring out how to populate it nicely. There are new games coming [out], so people get more inspiration and references. Everybody wants to push to the maximum. So ultimately it's almost like a constant fight between a lot of awesome, talented content people doing amazing, awesome-looking things,

pushing everything to the max. And there is the problem, because when you see these things that look freaking awesome, you don't want to be the guy that says, 'I don't think we can make this run, so you should cut it'."

**"It's like a constant fight between a lot of people doing amazing things, pushing everything to the max"**

Perhaps this is why developers won't say that the solution is as simple as adding more development time. Because more time doesn't just allow the technical team to find efficiencies – it allows every other team to iterate on their contributions too.

That's one explanation of why we tend to see performance issues fixed so swiftly post-launch: then, and only then, is the content itself locked. With no further opportunities for levels and assets to change, development efforts can be focused on optimisation.

**There's consensus among** our interviewees that 30fps quality and 60fps performance mode standards will most likely endure. But does this situation indicate that studios have already found the performance ceiling of PS5 and Xbox Series X? "It's still relatively early in the lifespan of the hardware," Grier says,

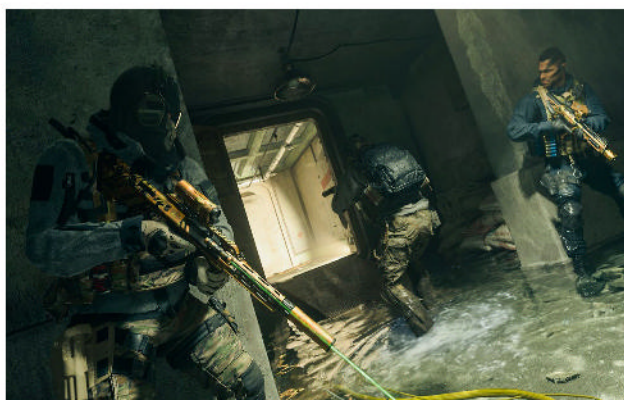


Locking a track-based racer such as *Ride 5* at 60fps is a more straightforward task than trying to get an open-world game to perform

"so it's tricky to tell. But developers will always find ways to push the capabilities and give players options."

And we're likely to see occasional outliers throughout the generation, he adds: "Some rare titles might target 120Hz and a few projects might decide to target only 30fps late in the console cycle – because graphics development does not stand still. Engine improvements tend to squeeze more performance out of the same hardware, so I would not be surprised to see a rise in quality [or] dynamic resolution at the same framerate over time."

Consoles have always brought a degree of technological compromise alongside their neat closed ecosystems, ease of use and price points. While PC players – or at least the most dedicated among them – can build machines that don't have to choose between 4K, 60fps or the most complex lighting and rendering techniques available, that comes with its own issues, as we've seen from the extremely wobbly state in which *Star Wars Jedi: Survivor* arrived on PC. But it's worth remembering that performance and quality modes give console players a degree more agency than they had a generation ago – even if in some cases they need to wait a while beyond a game's launch for that choice to become available. ■



The 60fps update of *Far Cry 5* (above) shows the value of refining the refresh rate of older games, providing a substantial reason for lapsed players to return. To really feel the benefit, it's worth playing the unenhanced *Far Cry 4* before or after. When it comes to 120fps on PS5 and Series X, games such as *Call Of Duty Warzone 2.0* (above centre) are leading the way

## MODE SWITCH

Performance, quality, and what else?



Wider adoption of an Early Access-like model on consoles could offer some benefits for hitting performance targets, specifically a direct line to the community about exactly how important framerate is for a given title, and when development resources should be focused elsewhere. Another option is a more granular graphics settings menu – but that, Puha argues, runs contrary to the fundamental purpose of a game console. "Consoles are not a PC and are not supposed to be a PC," he says. "To me, ever since I got my Super Nintendo, it's plug in and play, right? I think that's a big attraction for a lot of people."



# Dependable independents

After 3,000 games and ten years, ID@Xbox thunders on. But **what guides its journey?**

Microsoft's plan to open up its console ecosystem to a wider pool of game developers emerged just two years after the original Xbox launched. And it began with a disc in the post. When the Xbox Live Arcade (XBLA) service launched in 2004, interested players had to request the software from Microsoft. That approach would blossom considerably further, of course, in the Xbox 360 era – something with which **Chris Charla** was all too familiar. At the time, he was working as a producer at Backbone Entertainment, bringing arcade classics such as *Joust*, *Defender* and *Robotron: 2084* to XBLA. He soon found himself on the other side of the table, however, joining Microsoft as XBLA portfolio director in 2010, where he quickly realised the company could be doing more to spotlight the work of smaller developers.

As a result, in 2013, ID@Xbox was born with Charla at the reins as programme director. As the service marks its tenth anniversary, it has been part of the launch of over 3,000 games, and paid out \$4bn to independent developers. Now, in advance of his keynote at this summer's Develop Conference in Brighton, Charla tells us how ID@Xbox has evolved, and where it might be headed next.

## What motivated the move from XBLA to ID@Xbox a decade ago?

As we got towards the Xbox One era, Microsoft had some... I don't know if the right word is missteps, but we were not progressing as fast as the independent development scene was progressing. I think Microsoft did this amazing job of

helping to usher in the indie scene with Xbox Live Arcade. And we saw, 15 years ago with the Summer of Arcade in 2008, games like *Castle Crashers* and *Braid*. There was just this huge flowering of creativity in the scene, and soon what developers wanted to do progressed faster than what our backend tooling on 360 allowed us to enable. And so we sort of slipped behind, and we were working really hard to figure out: 'Hey, how do we catch up? How do we step in front of this?' And that was the genesis of the ID@Xbox programme.

## What were the founding principles of ID@Xbox back in 2013?

We began with some fundamental assumptions. One was, you know, indie games were some of the best content on Earth; Xbox players need access to that if they're gonna have a great console. And the way to get this content on Xbox is not to try and pick and choose, like: 'Who's the winner? Who's the cool indie? Who's the uncool

indie?' Instead, we just created a framework where it's easy for every independent developer to self-publish on Xbox, and easy to get their games on Xbox. And when I say 'easy', let's just be honest, I mean 'straightforward' – because it's never easy to make a videogame. But make it as easy as possible to get the game out there. That's been our North Star since day one.

## What kind of support do you provide for these developers today?

The programme has actually changed over the last ten years. Because when

### GUIDED BY VOICES

Charla recognises the difficulties of knowing, from a platform holder's perspective, what independent developers actually need: "A lot of times we have a reasonable idea, but the only way we really know is to talk to developers and listen. The summer before we launched ID@Xbox, I think we talked to 50 developers about the idea, and made a lot of changes to the programme based on that feedback. One of the key things that has been done right with the programme is we've never stopped listening."

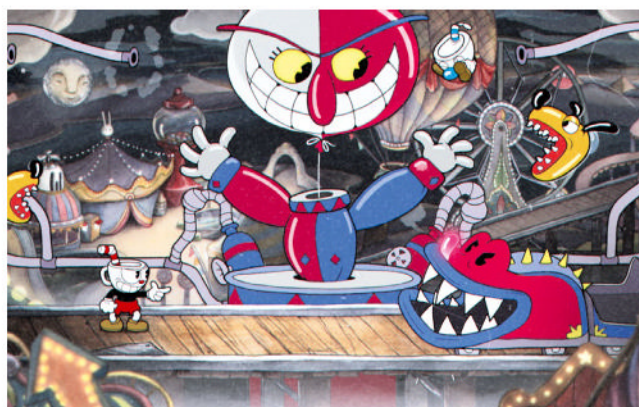
we started, all developers needed – all they were asking for, all they wanted – was to just self-publish. They needed devkits and they needed to self-publish, but as time's gone on, the market has gotten more crowded. Discovery has always been a challenge, and what developers need has changed and grown. I think it's been important for us to recognise and support that.

And, hey, we see the sales data for thousands of games a year. We should be able to share that with indie partners – not individual titles' sales data, or private information, but let people know: this genre is doing well, this genre is going to have more modest expectations, and this day of the week is the best day to ship on Xbox – Friday, by the way – or this is the worst day to ship on Xbox if you're an independent developer. That's a Tuesday.

## As we look ahead to the next ten years, where do you foresee the biggest changes for ID@Xbox?

I think that the business model innovations – first of digital distribution, then of free-to-play on console, and now with subscriptions on console, with Game Pass and others – are a really important component, by giving players choice, and giving developers freedom to try different things. I think the other big challenge that we have over the next ten years is, how do we really make fundamental improvements to discovery? There is an audience out there of three billion-plus people playing games. Every game that is of quality has an audience. How do we, as Microsoft and as a platform holder, help indie folks find that audience? To me, that's the great challenge that we have over the next two, three, five or seven years. ■

Prior to his careers at Backbone Entertainment and Microsoft, Charla worked on Next Generation, a sister publication to Edge in the US



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE *Castle Crashers*, *Tunic*, *Cuphead* and *Braid* are some key markers on Microsoft's Xbox indie journey to date, which has only strengthened since the XBLA days

## SURVIVE AND THRIVE

Highlights from a decade of development



As Charla prepares his Develop keynote, he considers how the indie scene has grown over ID@Xbox's lifetime. "I think the main thing I want to talk about is the unbelievable – I don't even know how to articulate it – flowering of creativity, inspiration, progression, and innovation that indie developers have brought [in] the last ten years. There's been *Vampire Survivors*' success, and all these games we just wouldn't have predicted," he says. "It's just a fantastic time to be associated with this industry, whether you're an observer, a player, or a creator."

# Changing the narrative

Five years of LudoNarraCon, showcasing videogame storytelling on a digital stage

Back when Fellow Traveller was still known as Surprise Attack, the Australian publisher exhibited at a lot of game shows, from PAX East to Gamescom. "We were out at these events three or four times a year, as well as doing stuff here in Australia," says founder **Chris Wright**. "So a large part of our marketing spend was doing these events." Each trip, Wright says, would cost around \$20,000, including travel and hiring a booth. "Increasingly, we were just saying: 'Is this really where we should be spending our money?'"

It's a question that is particularly pertinent in 2023, in the wake of the cancellation of E3 – once the firmest fixture in the videogame calendar – as many of the major publishers move instead towards online showcases. But for Fellow Traveller this shift started back in 2018, following its rebranding from Surprise Attack and the tightening focus of its portfolio. "We were looking at our games and saying, 'you can't make a 15-minute demo of this emotional narrative game – you need an hour with it'," Wright says. "And that doesn't suit a show floor." The solution was LudoNarraCon, a digital-only festival, run entirely through Steam, which marks its fifth year this May.

At the first event in 2019, though, the concept of a digital-only conference was met with confusion. "People were asking questions in the panel stream, and every other question was: 'What is this? What's happening? I don't understand'," Wright remembers. "I spent most of the show explaining to people, one by one: 'This is a convention'. Because they'd never seen

it before." But by the time of the second, arriving not long after the first wave of COVID lockdowns, things had changed dramatically. "Suddenly we'd gone from trying to convince people to join the event to having to turn down three or four people for every one that we let in."

The number of games on show in 2020 almost doubled from the first year – but Wright says that since then they've kept it at between 40 and 50 titles. "When we went from 24 to 50 [games], the relative benefits per game definitely shrank." The Fellow Traveller team painstakingly curates the list of titles featured in each LudoNarraCon. Aside from practical considerations, such as release date, geographical diversity is also taken into account.

"We've got quite a number of Latin American teams this year, and teams from Asia. We've got one team from South Africa," Wright says. "We could easily fill it with European and US teams, but it's actually quite hard to get in if you're in those regions. It's probably more competitive."

One of the benefits of hosting a digital-only event is that it eliminates the cost of travel, making LudoNarraCon equally accessible to all. "Developers from poorer countries get just the same access as a developer from the US or UK," Wright says. And unlike physical conferences, it's totally free to exhibit at LudoNarraCon. "We don't charge developers to come. We don't take sponsorship. We don't make any money out of it," Wright explains. Putting on the conference costs Fellow Traveller roughly the equivalent of attending two physical

**DROWNED OUT**  
At the third LudoNarraCon in 2021, Fellow Traveller experimented with selling supporter packs which included wallpapers, music and a bespoke game, commissioned from *Kind Words* developer PopCannibal. "We said, 'OK, you've got two months to make a game – here's \$10,000'. And he came up with this adaptation of *Cyrano de Bergerac*." The idea was that LudoNarraCon would commission a new game each year, Wright says, but it didn't really work out. "We made just enough money to recover the cost of funding the game. And we couldn't really support it in future years, because it took quite a lot of time as well as the money."

events – but it's easily worth the money. "We treat it more as our investment in the narrative games space. We're trying to lift up indies doing interesting things in narrative," Wright says. "And from a brand and goodwill point of view, there's some strong benefits to us as well."

Then there's the simple fact that, by being online, LudoNarraCon can reach a far bigger audience than a physical show, where perhaps a few hundred people might play your demo. "If you can convince 300 people to buy a game, that's nice, but it doesn't really move the needle," Wright says.

But how can a digital-only offering replicate the human element of a physical conference – the chance to catch up with old friends, meet new people and maybe form lasting relationships? It can't, Wright admits. "I think it's the one big flaw in it. I guess it's similar to the whole thing of working remotely. We can now live anywhere and work anywhere, and that's great. But you don't have the 'walk into the office and get a coffee together' aspect. Going digital, you just have to accept that some of the things get lost."

In light of E3's cancellation, the future feels more digital than ever, but Wright envisages a reinvention of physical events. "PAX and so on will push toward community engagement and those things that they excel at, even if the big companies aren't there as much," he predicts, adding that we might see the emergence of 'micro-conferences' in lieu of big, flashy events. He likens it to the continued life of physical media: "What happens is all these boutique, really expensive magazines come back, because they're doing the things that only magazines, only print can do," he says. "You have to get through the dip, and then invent it back." ■



LudoNarraCon founder Chris Wright is also MD of Fellow Traveller



"It's a fascinating format, and a bit lower pressure than a physical conference," says game writer Richard Dansky, who signed up to join a LudoNarraCon panel for this year's event.





## PIXEL CRAFT

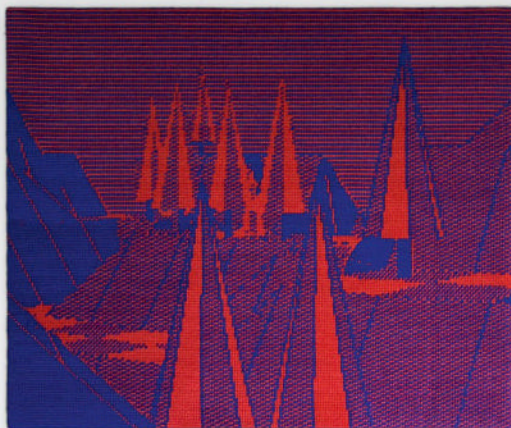
Making dots of light physical,  
one coloured strand at a time

We've seen game-inspired needlecraft before, but never anything quite as striking as French artist **Marine Beaufils'** interpretations of Geoff Crammond's classic, starkly rendered 3D puzzler *The Sentinel* (pictured right).

"The ZX Spectrum version of *The Sentinel* uses its palette of eight colours in duo, with black or blue as a common denominator, and this masterful use of colours fascinated me," Beaufils says of her attraction to honouring the game this way. "I hadn't planned on making a series – embroidery is a long and tedious process – but it was impossible for me to choose among the 13 different duos of colour, so I decided to make them all!"

Beaufils says that her "strongest motivation is the feeling that every videogame is a complex flux of images with many unseen subtleties," and her creations extend to the static iconography of videogame maps, our favourites being her interpretations of *Metroid*, bringing new texture to the layout of the series' first four instalments.

Pick your own favourites at [www.marine.st](http://www.marine.st), where Beaufils also showcases an assortment of non-game creations. ■







Beaufils focuses on exploring older games, including *Super Metroid*, whose world map features opposite. Though her work isn't primarily commercial, it is available to purchase – send enquiries to [contact@marine.st](mailto:contact@marine.st)



# Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"We know what times to call. We know exactly who to call and when. **We know who has a higher propensity to be more susceptible** to our call."

Zynga vice president **Gemma Doyle** explains how the company squeezes the biggest whales in its playerbase. (Did it just get really chilly in here, or is our blood running cold for another reason?)



"That first inning ended with the crypto crash last year, so **now we're in the second inning...**"

Please, **Trip Hawkins**, one inning of a blockchain-infused Metaverse was quite enough



"This #BlockTheBlue pressure campaign are losers and goons. **They're the cool kids from junior high who worked to exclude we nerds...**"

Being nerdy, **Tim Sweeney**, it should be "us nerds", really

**"It does more to shake our confidence in the future** of the opportunity to grow a technology business in Britain than we've ever confronted before."

As the CMA blocks the Activision Blizzard acquisition, Microsoft president **Brad Smith** casts a cloud over UK studios such as Rare



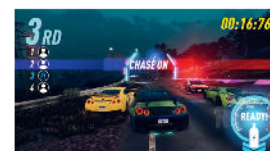
## ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



**Game** Need For Speed Heat: Taken Down – Motion Deluxe  
**Manufacturer** Adrenaline Amusements

This, frankly, is what we want to see from arcade gaming: a honking great cabinet that summons the memory of the deluxe iteration of *OutRun* rolling up at our local arcade hangout, instantly making everything around it feel just a little bit insignificant. In recent years we've seen a few jumbo-sized machines make waves in the arcade scene, but the biggest, including *Raw Thrills' World's Largest Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders Frenzy*, are by definition heavy on gimmicks. Adrenaline Amusements has taken a more traditional route with the new Motion Deluxe edition of *NFS Heat: Taken Down*, adding '16-degree' hydraulic movement to the game it launched earlier this year, and supporting up to four players, each with a whopping 75" 4K screen. Consumer release *Need For Speed Heat*, from 2019, is at the centre of it all, albeit with plenty of tweaks to make it better suit the arcade context. Nearly nine feet in height, and topped with an LED dot-matrix display featuring game animations along with images of players taken with the hardware's built-in camera, it will be a difficult cabinet to miss when it arrives at larger entertainment venues soon.





# CORE KEEPER

PAWS & CLAWS UPDATE



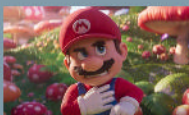
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## GAMES

**Young Horses Free Range**  
[bit.ly/horsetoants](http://bit.ly/horsetoants)

*BugsnaX* developer Young Horses has released four of its jam games and prototypes onto Steam as part of a new 'Free Range' initiative, providing fascinating insight into both the development process and the studio's dedication to insect puns. Along with the student-project version of *Octodad* that gave the studio its start are two Ludum Dare entries. 2014's *Snakelade* combines swipe-based dating apps with *Blockade* and a length of old hosepipe, while 2015's *Antbassador* has you steering a single flopping finger (with the developer's trademark clumsy physics) through a kingdom of ants. The highlight, though, is *Independant* a tech demo made to help the team cut their teeth on Unreal Engine 5 that doubles as a serviceable collection platform where you play a fornic forager in a Toy Story-like world of giants.



## FILM

**The Super Mario Bros Movie**  
[bit.ly/SMBfilm](http://bit.ly/SMBfilm)

Having recently taken up TV criticism as a hobby, Shigeru Miyamoto's expression of surprise at this shallow adap's box-office takings is perhaps the only review you need. Bright, busy and loud, it's not as bad as some claim, but it is blandly formulaic, with a script in need of punching up, phoned-in performances (Jack Black's Bowser excepted), and predictable needle drops. Despite a cavalcade of references from the Mushroom Kingdom and beyond, Illumination's house style stifles Nintendo's magic. Put simply, it's much more *New Super Mario Bros* than *Galaxy*.

## WEB GAME

**Timeclone**  
[bit.ly/timeclone](http://bit.ly/timeclone)

Rowan Wood's taut, minimalist puzzler places you into a series of claustrophobic grids, giving you a limited number of moves – represented by pink circles – to reach the swirling exit. You won't always have enough turns to get there, so you must pick up a fresh circle and wait to grant yourself an extra go. But you may have noticed that the 'wait' button also stands for 'end loop': you'll be warped to the start point, with a clone appearing in your stead, their next movement matching your previous one. These doubles can be nudged to collect turns on your behalf, or to bump you along – but they can also become obstructions, too, blocking your path or even the exit. All the while, messages above the stage invite you to consider which of these avatars is actually the real you. It's cleverly designed and gently unsettling all at once.



# THIS MONTH ON EDGE

Some of the other things on our minds when we weren't doing everything else

## MERCH

**Chicory Pizza plush**  
[bit.ly/ticklishpizza](http://bit.ly/ticklishpizza)

One of the brilliant things about Chicory is that it is equally an examination of the personal costs of creativity, both mental and emotional, and a game about a cute dog with a very big paintbrush. This soft toy, co-designed by Fangamer's Audrey Waner and the game's character designer Alexis Dean-Jones, rather leans into the latter aspect. Although, in decorating it with the included washable markers, who knows what inner tortured artist you might unleash? And speaking of personal costs, our eye drifts from this item to other recent additions to Fangamer's catalogue, including a new range of *Outer Wilds* T-shirts and an *Ace Attorney* 'Objection!' pillow. Uh oh.



## continue quit

### Seed money

Sega acquires *Angry Birds* maker Rovio for \$775m to aid its push into mobile...

### 'Station to 'Station

Sony announces it has shipped over 38m PS5s, after a record-breaking Q1 for the console...

### Halo

Bungie veteran and *Infinite* creative director Joseph Staten joins Netflix Games...

### Idol thoughts

May's *Spider Of Lanka* expansion brings three macabre new mysteries to *The Case Of The Golden Idol*

### Blizzard warning

...while the UK's Competition And Markets Authority blocks Microsoft's \$68.7bn Acti deal

### Red ring

...as Microsoft's quarterlies show a 40 per cent decline in Xbox hardware revenues

### Goodbye

...while, after 20 years with Microsoft, Frank O'Connor is the latest 343 departee

### Divided front

Unity CEO John Riccitiello lays off 600 more employees, explaining it as a move towards "higher growth"



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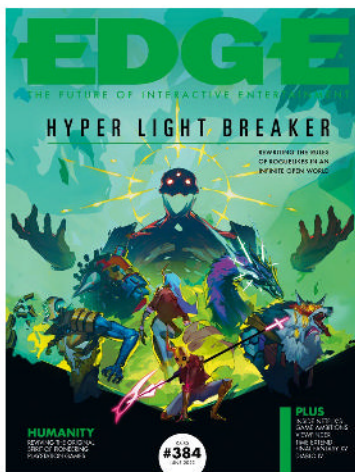
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# DISPATCHES

## JULY



Issue 384

## Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to [edge@futurenet.com](mailto:edge@futurenet.com). Our letter of the month wins an exclusive **Edge** T-shirt



### A real achievement

As a father of two children who are now starting to find their own way in the world, I wanted to say thanks for publishing all these letters from other parents struggling to balance an abundance of games with a lack of time. It's a tale very familiar to me, but I want to say that it does get better over time. Maybe not in terms of recapturing those hours spent in a dark room absorbed in a single game, but certainly a reconnection with gaming across people and generations.

Even if I've not been able to bask in open worlds for more than a few hours a week, gaming has become interwoven into my own family relationships. Sometimes it's the hilarity of *Heave Ho* or *Gang*

*Beasts*, sometimes it's an "educational" retrogaming Wii U session, or occasionally it's working through Battle Pass pages and attending special end-of-season events together. Gaming has become a middle ground where we parents and kids can interact equally, where we learn to compete and co-operate within the confines of certain rules and — fingers crossed — even just have some *fun*.

But it's not all virtual playing fields and grass-filled plateaus. One aspect of family gaming remains as frustrating and unfun as ever. Yes, I'm talking about setting up parent and child accounts, for different games, by different publishers, across different platforms. A heady concoction of multinational law, 'convenient' sign-in methods, and (admittedly my own self-enforced) strong security has resulted in a complicated (read: horrific) series of steps and memories whenever somebody wants to log in somewhere. Which feels like most days.

Sign in with your Microsoft/Nintendo/Epic/Ubisoft/Pokémon/Google/Government account? Authenticate with your smart device/QR code/2FA key/iris

print? Navigate the intricacies of which of your children can talk to which of their friends using voice chat, or can use their pocket-money card to pay for some ridiculous in-game currency? Playing online often has me reaching for the deck of cards and vodka before a match has even begun.

I have a simple suggestion. Reward parents for jumping through these hoops in the same way that companies have mastered rewarding our in-game attention spans. Throw in some 'responsible adult' missions, daily quests, and all the other metagame incentives, and make us feel better for trying to set things up properly. Give us platinum points for successfully configuring

a workable password system, and then double them every time we authenticate on a new system, or manage to pay for something. Dish out 'exasperated parent' skins, and poses reflecting the manic hunt for a charging cable. Add dramatic music to login screens, and Bond-style countdowns — just about anything that makes it less

of a chore to play together.

After all, despite the societal concern about the effects that 'violent videogames' and 'lootbox addiction' have on children's minds, it still feels like there's a mindset that wants to keep gaming generations apart: gory and violent games for the grown-ups, cartoony games for the kids. Is that all there is to it? Or could there still be space for games such as *Mario Kart: Double Dash* — games where families can work together as a slightly out-of-kilter team, help each other out, and maybe even learn from each other? Can multiplayer gaming take a bigger leap, and encourage us to form stronger bonds between generations? Anyway, must go — I'm being pestered to pay for something or other and I've lost my phone.

**Graham Lally**

*"Could there still be space for games such as Double Dash — where families work together?"*





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edgeonline  
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fellow Edge readers

Good points, all, although frankly we yearn for some family *Mario Kart* sessions as convivial as yours. The **Edge** T-shirt is duly on its way – once you’ve fully authenticated your details, of course.

## Rush release

I enjoyed tremendously the thoughtful analysis of *Hi-Fi Rush*’s (lack of) release strategy in E382. Near the end of the piece, the author points to Microsoft as the most likely suspect to perfect the art of shadow dropping. While it makes total sense to stock the Game Pass library with a surprise release every so often, I’d argue another company is even better at it: Netflix.

What really sets them apart is they quietly launch a new game and then proceed to tell literally nobody about it. That might make sense for a mobile port of a game that’s been out there for a while, such as *Kentucky Route Zero*, but brand-new day-one releases like *Desta: The Memories Between* or more recently *Highwater* (which at the time of writing isn’t even out another platform!) slip by equally unnoticed. Hell, I had to figure out the follow-up to *Valiant Hearts* – a Netflix exclusive! – dropped from some developers high-fiving each other on LinkedIn over the release. No newsletter, not a single tweet, nothing.

Whether this is the result of an intentional strategy or symptomatic of a videogame programme still finding its footing remains to be seen, but one thing’s for sure: for now, Netflix is the ultimate master of the shadow drop.

**Christophe de Bont**

Quite. Given *Highwater*’s mobile release had passed us by entirely until reading this, it’s probably not a useful long-term strategy.

## No Panic

I recently received the last of game in the first season for my Playdate console, a series of pleasant surprises on a console that was also a bit of a surprise itself, since I’d half-

forgotten about my preorder. Despite having a huge PS Plus library – and thanks to discounts, now a PS Plus Extra subscription – and a modest amount of free time, I’ve rarely made the time to catch up on the interesting little indie games I feel like I should be playing. Yet I found myself not only digging into and getting to grips with the Playdate’s 24-title library, but actually finishing many of the games outright.

Part of this is pacing, certainly. The days when I could finish just the monthly PS Plus releases ended as they gradually went from indie games to triple-A, but with a bit of concentration I could at least have a decent stab at each pair of Playdate games in their particular week. The other half of the equation is, I think, the very deliberate curation involved. While updates to console subscription libraries often feel like someone has just dumped a second-hand shelf from the local Game at my front door, the fact that someone actually selected the Playdate games and tried to set them in to a nice, balanced assortment imbued each new week’s update with a satisfying significance.

It’s a design decision I think Sony and Microsoft could learn from. If there was a selection curated by Hideo Kojima, or an Annapurna retrospective season, I dare say it could address these services’ discoverability problems and also build the water-cooler buzz of a Netflix season without the hassle of episodic game design. (Imagine the hot takes!) Neither company lacks for content. There’s a hint of this, I think, in Nintendo’s decision to release its GBA Switch games selection with *Metroid Fusion* around the same time as *Metroid Prime Remastered*. Thinking further back, *Super Metroid* hit the Wii’s virtual console in parallel with *Metroid Prime 3*.

At the risk of appearing as if I’m buttering you up, curation is part of why I still subscribe to a print magazine after all these years. It’s quite satisfying to disregard the constant buzz of identical stories across news blogs and social media, abdicate responsibility for finding the good stuff, and check out a

group of interesting people’s idea of what might constitute interesting game news. Your feature/preview/genre-editorial on *After Us* in E383 was a particular pleasure in that regard. Keep at it!

**Alex Whiteside**

Thanks, Alex. And we promise faithfully that we don’t ‘curate’ these pages by favouring letters that offer praise. Definitely not.

## Face off

I’m still catching up on recent issues of **Edge** and loved Steven Poole’s column on Peekaboo being the Game Of The Species. However, in naming this crowning achievement, has he once again resurrected the multi-issue debate on what constitutes a game? If the simple subversion of expectation to inspire joy constitutes true infinite replayability, are jokes games? After all, the structure of a joke generally relies on a certain amount of cognitive backtracking, following the punchline that recontextualizes the setup into joyous surprise. If Netflix were to roll out a ‘click to continue’ feature after each joke in a standup routine, would it become a narrative game? This assumes that a game inherently requires two features: (1) A story or puzzle that plays with expectations; (2) Interactivity. Peekaboo is an interactive puzzle about where the face went. Most stories feature rising action leading to a climax that in some way subverts expectations. Can the interactive component be purely cognitive? Are all of our attempts at anticipating where a story is going really a game? Have stories in general always been games? Of course, if we find any of this to be satisfyingly conclusive, it only paves the way for a John Cage-esque figure to come along and make an interaction where absolutely nothing changes – which in itself would still be a subversion of expectations.

**Ari Love**

Well, precisely. Is 4’33” a game? It’s a debate that could fill *Dispatches* for a good few issues hence. Actually, perhaps not. ■



STEVEN POOLE

## Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

We live, or so it is routinely claimed, in an age of misinformation. Fake news, Russian trolls and antivax conspiracies flood communication channels. Even reasonable people can fall prey to misinformation, defined as false information that is distributed naively, or disinformation (originally coined after the Soviet Russian equivalent), which is false information deliberately spread in order to mislead an enemy, whether foreign or domestic.

Elon Musk's response to this problem is, it seems, to deliberately make it worse, by promoting the mad and/or abusive tweets of paying blue-tick people in any conversation and leaving it difficult to figure out whether an account claiming to be from a trusted organization, which formerly would have been 'verified', is genuine or an impostor.

Of course, in the age of social media, the news itself is a game, an MMORPG in which media organisations run stories that are entirely about what people on social media have said about stories run by other media organisations. Chasing after the eyeballs of Wordle, the Washington Post recently launched its own 'game', a single-question quiz about current affairs called On The Record. (The day I tried it, I failed because I was somehow unaware of a spat involving the French complaining about Miller High Life calling itself "the Champagne of beers". If it doesn't come from the Haut Vie region of France, it's just sparkling hop-water.)

The currency of the game of news is attention, and the prize, if you get really notorious, is a spot on a right-wing talk channel. Truth is neither here nor there. But what if we were able to beat the news game at its own game by, er, playing a game? That, at least, is the hope of the Global Engagement Center, a branch of the US State Department, which commissioned Tilt Studio to design its latest game for concerned citizens, a highly engaging short confection called *Cat Park*.

Presented in a beautiful flat art style, you wake up in your dingy apartment with a



It proposes that citizens can be brain-jabbed against fake news as they are arm-jabbed against COVID

laptop and an old pizza box. Soon a glamorous stranger encourages you to acquire 'influence' on a social-media app (called, cutely, Friendly) by making a series of posts denouncing the city's new park for cats.

This is all done on your in-game phone, so for maximum 21st-century technological vertigo you should play the game on your actual phone. There you are taught how to write a viral headline, by choosing the most emotive words from a selection. I ended up quite proud of "Outrageous! City prioritises elitist pets over our kids!", which reminded me pleasantly of the scaremongering over a

"new elite" recently flogged by the political-science professor Matt Goodwin. (The "new elite", confusingly, is made up of all the people who haven't been in power for the past 13 years.) In the game, you can use other apps to create memes and to doctor images, perhaps to imply that the mayor is being bribed or has joined a mysterious cult that worships felines. At length the suspicion may begin to dawn on you, though, that you are yourself being manipulated to serve darker purposes.

*Cat Park* is not just well designed but also authentically funny, with success notifications such as "FANTASTIC you really messed with people's emotions", and little jokes such as a café named "Le chat qui rit", presumably as a nod to the soft cheese featuring a chuckling cow. The NPCs on Friendly also show an amusing gamut of real-life response styles ("Reposted that cat park meme 1,000 times! I love Caffeine!").

But will it also be effective? The game embodies serious research on 'Inoculation Science', an initiative from the universities of Cambridge and Bristol, which proposes that citizens can be brain-jabbed against fake news as they are arm-jabbed against COVID. "Rather than simply waiting for lies to spread, and then debunking them with a fact-check, we can leverage games like *Cat Park* to practically educate ourselves about common disinformation techniques," the Global Engagement Center's Davor Devic said in an interview with *The Economist*.

According to Inoculation Science, such work can build up one's "mental antibodies" to misinformation, by learning how to recognise its common features, such as emotive language, scapegoating, the use of "fake experts", and so forth. The real question, though, is whether a game such as *Cat Park* can help in this laudable project when it is but a simulacrum of the real thing – the game of social media we all hate but still can't help playing.

Steven Poole is a writer, composer and author whose books include *Trigger Happy 2.0*, *Unspeaking*, and *Rethink*



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ADRIAN HON

## Alternate Reality

Notes from videogaming's borders

One of my favourite T-shirts was created to promote *The Lost Arcade*, the 2015 documentary that told the story behind the closure of New York's Chinatown Fair arcade in 2011. I never visited Chinatown Fair, but its story of friendships found and lost amid the merciless tides of technology and commerce summed up the dismal fate of arcades worldwide.

When I was growing up in the '90s, arcades were already on the downswing. Outside of my visits to the Trocadero in London and entertainment complexes in the US, it was slim pickings for anything but the most popular arcade games in British cinemas and bowling alleys. I'd scour Internet forums to find the closest *Dance Dance Revolution* machine, and whisper tales of Konami's full-body motion-tracking lightgun game *Police 911* to wide-eyed friends.

The nadir came in the 2000s and 2010s. Arcades were closing everywhere, vanquished by the one-two combo of free-to-play smartphone games and consoles that had become graphics powerhouses. Even arcade games' gimmicky peripherals and motion controls were brought to millions of homes by *Guitar Hero* and Nintendo's Wii. Some operators placed their hopes on pricy virtual reality setups, few of which have broken out in the same way that Oculus' *Quest 2* has.

And yet arcades persist. I wouldn't say that the tide is turning, but rather that we're reaching a new normal where more and more cities have popular, well-stocked arcades whose main innovation appears to be combining games with alcohol. In my hometown of Edinburgh, the new NQ64 arcade seems to make most of its money from selling bright, pricy cocktails to the crowds waiting in line for *Mario Kart* and *Dance Dance Revolution*.

But I don't think it's all about the booze, either. The three other NQ64 branches I've visited have all been in surprisingly central locations, albeit in basements where their loud music is likely to annoy fewer



Arcades are designed to give us permission to behave differently. They let us lose our inhibitions safely

neighbours; and recently I noticed a new arcade in London's Brunswick Centre amid a row of perennially empty storefronts. Not long ago, the rent would've been far beyond what an arcade can afford; today, I wouldn't be surprised if landlords are begging them to set up shop. Perhaps the death of the high street is also the rebirth of the arcade.

The most interesting thing about these arcades is their clientele. As far as I can tell, the patrons of places such as NQ64 are too young to have played most of their games when they were released, which means their affection isn't merely fuelled by nostalgia,

which feeds into my fondness for *Silent Scope* and *Crazy Taxi*, just as *Pac-Man* and *Galaga* do the same for older generations. And in truth, the charm of arcade games has nothing to do with novelty or sentimental attachments. I love a game of skeeball just as much as a round of *Rock Band*, and on a recent visit to the magical Musée Des Arts Forains in Paris – a museum of beautifully preserved fairground rides – I had a blast playing Roll-A-Ball Horse Racing, which was invented long before I was born. Like their fairground antecedents, good arcade games are evergreen. Skeeball will always have its fans, alongside basketball games and pinball machines and *Time Crisis* and *Mario Kart*.

Arcade games aren't popular just because of their physicality, either. My collection of ageing *Rock Band* peripherals is proof of how that can be replicated at home. It's not even in their in-person multiplayer or social aspect, despite the demise of splitscreen games and couch co-op.

No, arcades' popularity lies in their delicate, unique context: the promise of a night out with friends where you're committing to play. That's why young people are going; that's why they can sell drinks; that's why it's dark; and that's why there's loud music. Arcades are designed to give us permission to behave differently. They let us lose our inhibitions safely, so we can ram each other off the road and survive. We get to see old friends and colleagues in new ways, as rivals and allies if only for one night, and be delighted by their unexpected driving or dancing expertise.

Arcades might not be great business, depending on how much rent costs and how much you enjoy repairing machines that malfunction often. In fact, I'm pretty sure they're not. But that's OK, because not everything needs to be about money. Sometimes it's just about the thrill you can give a group of friends, if only for a moment.

Adrian Hon is CEO of *Six To Start*, lead designer of *Zombies, Run!*, and author of the recently published *You've Been Played*



# HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN



# URGENT APPEAL



## Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is not just a humanitarian crisis for the Ukrainian people; it's a child protection emergency.

Up to 100,000 children warehoused in Ukraine's vast orphanage system – a network of over 700 buildings – risk being forgotten. Left to face the dangers of war alone as staff flee. As families are torn apart or forced from their homes, many more children are at risk of being separated from the love and protection they desperately need. Worse still, they are at risk of trafficking, or being placed in overcrowded, understaffed and poorly resourced orphanages in border countries.

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## THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

**30 Post Trauma**  
PC, consoles TBA

**34 Anger Foot**  
PC

**38 Silica**  
PC

**40 Astronaut:  
The Best**  
PC

**42 The Cosmic  
Wheel Sisterhood**  
PC, Switch

**44 Nighthawks**  
PC

**46 Harmony: The  
Fall Of Reverie**  
PC, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series

**46 Immortals Of Aveum**  
PC, PS5, Xbox Series

**46 Underground Blossom**  
Android, iOS, PC

**46 KarmaZoo**  
PC, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series

**46 Pâquerette Down  
The Bunburrows**  
PC



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# Look inside/look out

Perched on her windowsill, gazing out into the infinite void of space, soothsayer Fortuna, star of Deconstructeam's *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood*, sighs. Now into her 200th year of a millennium-long sentence, having been exiled to an asteroid for causing chaos with her ominous prophecies, she begs for a curse to "break this immortal isolation". Answering her call is Àbramar, a powerful Behemoth who has sympathy with her plight, having been imprisoned for 5,402 years. Fortuna decides to perform a reading for this otherworldly being. "You feel alone," she says. "You want to find beings with whom to share your existence."

That idea naturally reminds us of Madison Karrh's wonderful *Birth*, a game that seems to have opened the levee for indie games that deal, directly or otherwise, with the pandemic and the feelings of loneliness experienced during the early days of lockdown. We attempted to address that in our own way with **E345's** Feel Better special, an issue that really struck a chord. Of course, making a game takes a good deal longer than a magazine, so it's only now that we're seeing the industry's creative response. But in light of the dreadful pandemic-themed films dashed off by the movie industry during those early months, perhaps the extra time to process those emotions is no bad thing if it results in games that have something meaningful to say about what we've all been through.

Don't worry, it's not all navel-gazing introspection; evidently, some opted to indulge their sillier side as a coping mechanism. *Astronaut: The Best* isn't afraid to embrace absurdity, as you attempt to command a crew of hapless space cadets with personality quirks ranging from Fear Of Pigs to Looks Like An Asshole. And in *Anger Foot*, you can take your frustrations out on a series of doors (and the thugs behind them) by simply applying a bit of force via the sole of your shoe. Now if *that* doesn't make you feel better, we're not sure what will.

## MOST WANTED

### Hades II

PC

Nothing since Supergiant's peerless Roguelike has quite scratched that particular itch since. Could the studio's first-ever sequel do the trick? Either way, it can't be too long until we hear more. And SGF is just around the corner...

### The Invincible

PC, PS5, Xbox Series

As a compact, thoughtful science-fiction story that prizes exploration over action, this issue's cover game naturally brings to mind the one that occupied the same slot back in E371. A LudoNarraCon demo should hopefully whet a few appetites ahead of its planned launch this year.

### Hollow Knight: Silksong

PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series

True, we can't fully rule out the possibility of Team Cherry shadow-dropping it on deadline day. But while we do appreciate what must be the longest timed exclusive in **Edge** history, is there any chance of getting a bit of a move on with this?

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# POST TRAUMA

Fiends, Romans,  
bogeymen

<b>Developer</b>	Red Soul Games
<b>Publisher</b>	Raw Fury
<b>Format</b>	PC, consoles TBA
<b>Origin</b>	Spain
<b>Release</b>	2023

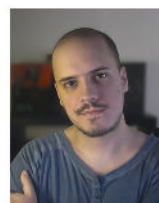
Roman Koyasu is a true everyman, of the kind you rarely see starring in videogames. He wears a literal blue-collar work shirt, tucked into faded jeans in a manner that doesn't exactly flatter his belly. His hair and beard are greying at uneven rates, the weight of his years visible in his face too — not just in the odd line and wrinkle of the skin but the way it hangs, gravity taking its slow but inevitable victory. He's an outlier among player-characters, perhaps, but Roman is the kind of person you can easily imagine passing on the street, a face you'd be unlikely to pick out of the crowd. And there's a good reason for that, because his forebears *are* real people: the ones whose 3D-scanned faces Epic used for its Metahuman technology.

Developer **Roberto Serra Gascón** remembers the moment he first laid eyes on Roman: "I was trying out a lot of stuff on with Metahuman, mixing faces — and then this guy appeared." He liked the idea of an older character, one whose body type wasn't the videogame default. "I was like, 'My character runs out of breath after running for about 30 seconds — he will be vulnerable,'" he says. "I think this fits."

Over time, Serra Gascón has come to love his protagonist, he tells us, but at first the manner of Roman's creation was the result of

simple necessity. The game's original demo, made to attract a publisher but publicly available on Itch.io, was the result of just four months' work by a single developer. Not that you'd know from looking. Beyond its all-too-human character model, its lovingly scuffed environments boast realtime shadows that follow Roman's movements and pool in the recesses of his face, finished off with careful deployment of depth-of-field and grain that lend a cinematic edge.

**Since this demo** did its job in convincing Raw Fury to sign the game, the *Post Trauma* team has grown to around a dozen developers. But even that first half-hour slice wasn't *strictly* the work of a single hand. "I was using stock assets, plugins, Metahumans — anything I could get my hands on," Serra Gascón confesses. "The project was super-dirty behind the scenes, it was a complete mess — but I had to get it out there, because I was running out of money." Unreal's technology shaped the game he was making. When Metahumans launched in 2020, Serra Gascón remembers thinking: "Oh, now I can use this to make the player-character and not have them look goofy, or cheap." This was not just the moment Roman was born, it was — perhaps even more importantly — the moment *Post Trauma* ►



Red Soul founder  
Roberto Serra Gascón



"Pale colours, fragile, broken," are some of Serra Gascón's watchwords when it comes to monster design. "Who always look like they are about to fall apart"







## POST TRAUMA



adopted a defining feature: its fixed thirdperson cameras.

In the demo, as Roman wakes on the floor of a strange subway carriage, the camera examines him from the far end of the train, peeking over its seats like a voyeur. Your eventual target, a chained and padlocked door, is framed in the background. In order to find the equipment that will open it, Roman must walk *into* the camera – meaning that, even when the level is brightly lit, what waits ahead remains unknown. At the same time, it makes you privy to information that your character is not. Such as the lithe figure, a few paces behind, that darts in and then quickly out of view.

This is an old trick, of course, and one that points towards Serra Gascón's greatest influence: "The old *Silent Hill* games are a super-big inspiration, of course. If I said they weren't, I would be lying." But rather than simply imitating those titles, he hopes to create a game that evokes the same sensation, a survival horror that relies less upon heart-rate-peaking jump scares ("though there have

to be some of those") than strange imagery and atmosphere to unsettle the player. On the basis of the preview build we've played, *Post Trauma* looks set to deliver.

**This time, Roman** finds himself in the dark of an abandoned hospital – a location you might recognise from *Post Trauma*'s grand unveiling at the 2022 Game Awards. Everything has a gauzy filtered quality to it, as if Playdead was brought in to handle the lighting on one of Capcom's recent *Resident Evil* remakes. And once again, mundane details – water fountains, bright-coloured vending machines, plastic waiting-room chairs – are intruded upon by the uncanny. Most notably, the thick fleshy vines that poke out between ceiling tiles, pale and glistening in a fashion that suggests internal processes. Turn the wrong corner, meanwhile, and you'll find yourself in a corridor where the smooth hospital walls give way to uneven bricks moving like bits of ribcage, making an uncomfortable scraping noise as they shift. It's a relief to be

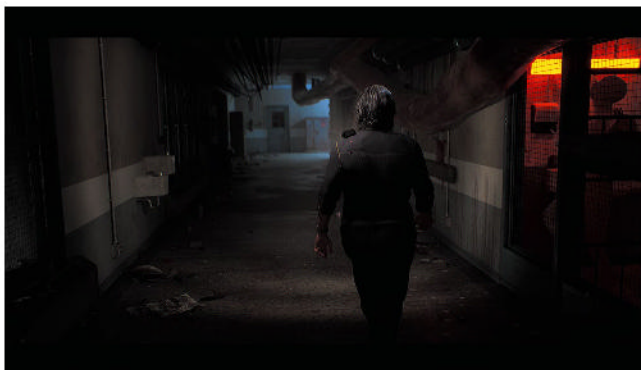
While *Post Trauma*'s original demo was made with Unreal Engine 4, the full game has transitioned to UES. "I needed those new features," Serra Gascón says



ABOVE Serra Gascón's influences also include *The Evil Within 2* ("the first one, not so much"), *Dead Space*, the art of Siren Head creator Trevor Henderson, and, rather unexpectedly, N64 game *Majora's Mask*







LEFT Given that *Post Trauma* started out as a firstperson game, we have to ask: are its initials an intentional nod to *PT*? "I honestly can't remember," Serra Gascón says – but *PT* is a favourite. "I will never forgive Konami for taking it away from me!"



TOP LEFT The approach to framing is informed by Serra Gascón's love of videogame photo modes: "I'm the type of person that will spend more time taking screenshots than actually playing the game." ABOVE The game is presented in an ultrawide aspect-ratio throughout. "I know a lot of people hate them," Serra Gascón says, "but I like the black bars, personally"

interrupted by a message over the hospital Tannoy, odd though it is to hear a voice – summoning you, by name, to the nurses' station – when there's not a single other sign of human life in the hospital. Which is not the same, of course, as saying that Roman is alone here.

The next noise we hear is a strange mix of groans, sobs, the odd giggle and, most disturbing of all, what seem to be the coos of a baby. So, upon encountering their source – a wad of flesh atop a pair of skinny legs, with half-formed arms protruding at all angles – we can't think help but of foetal tissue, of something gone terribly wrong during the gestation process. Which makes it rather hard to do what the game asks: kill it with a hammer. That discomfort, it seems, is the intent. "I'm not into the zombie, infected-type stuff you see in a lot of action-horror games," Serra Gascón says. "For me, it's more creepy if, rather than attacking you, it's like, 'Why is this monster that could kill me scared of me?' Something's not right here?"

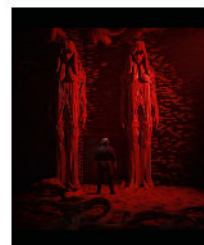
It'll be no surprise, then, to learn that combat is not exactly the focal point of

*Post Trauma*. It's been included because, in Serra Gascón's words, "you have to be afraid of dying", but it's kept mechanically simple. There are a handful of melee weapons, pulling from a stamina meter that, rather instructively, is also depleted by running. Serra Gascón is still weighing up the addition of a gun – "I prefer you having to get close to the enemies" – but even if one does make the cut, we shouldn't exactly be expecting *Resident Evil*-style shooting. "There will be maybe four bullets. In the whole game. So you have to make those tough calls. Maybe you can one-shot an enemy, but it means using up one of the bullets."

Instead, the emphasis is on puzzles, which are much more in the *Resi* mould. The entire hospital sequence builds towards us collecting a flesh sample to synthesise what is essentially a body-horror key to open the level's exit, culminating in a moment that embodies all of *Post Trauma*'s promise. We enter an operating theatre where the donor

***"There will be maybe four bullets. In the whole game. So you have to make tough calls"***

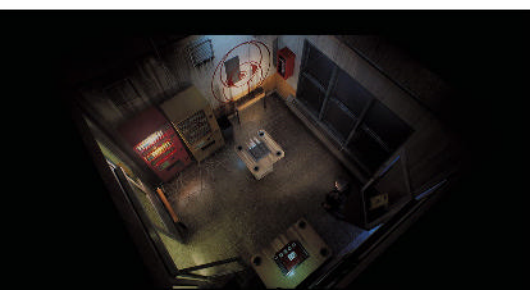
of this sample lies on the table, a helpless red mass of twitching sinew, rendered in painful detail, its low groans accompanied by the beep of an ECG. But what really makes this moment is its framing. The camera is positioned so that the body looms large in the foreground, left out of focus in a way that invites you to peer closer. The thing on the table couldn't look less like someone you'd expect to bump into on the street, but it looks at least as vulnerable as Roman – who lurks in the distance, clutching a kitchen knife – so that we can't help but invest at least a little of our humanity in it, before digging the blade in anyway. You don't get that with jump scares. ■



## Stomp-l'oeil

"There's almost no fixed-camera games out there right now – and it's something I really missed," Serra Gascón says. But that's not the only reason he opted for *Post Trauma*'s fixed angles. They're used to great aesthetic effect throughout, framing Roman from the far side of lightly frosted windows, and even through fleshy apertures in some of the game's more otherworldly architecture. For a dev who started out solo, and still only has a small team behind them, perhaps the biggest benefit is that the camera, contrary to the old saying, *does lie*. Serra Gascón and his art team can focus effort on the bits of environment that players will actually see, or else tuck a future scare out of view – "but if you move the camera, the trick is revealed".

The choice of a hospital setting surely isn't coincidental, given the game's theme of vulnerability: the whole place feels unhealthy







The visual debt to graffiti and underground comix artists is clear, though in play there's a Plasticine-like look that sands the edges off some of the game's more gruesome bits





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# ANGER FOOT

Firstperson action  
with a real kick

Developer	Free Lives
Publisher	Devolver Digital
Format	PC
Origin	South Africa
Release	2023





ANGER  
FOOT



With their tracksuits and tiny animal heads, *Anger Foot*'s enemies recall both the dog from Daft Punk's Da Funk video and the original Mario movie's truly cursed take on Goombas

The partnership between Devolver Digital and Free Lives has been a long and fruitful one: since 2015's *Broforce*, the publisher has put out five games from the South African developer. But, as in any long-term relationship, both parties have changed a lot over time. After years spent chasing the high of *Hotline Miami* with a string of games in love with their own naughtiness, Devolver's portfolio has matured into one of great variety and consistently high quality. Meanwhile, after the VR splatstick of *Gorn* and the rather self-explanatory action of *Genital Jousting*, Free Lives has shown the world a very different face with eco-aware city builder *Terra Nil*. And now here comes *Anger Foot*, to well and truly put the boot to that narrative.

This is the kind of game where you'll frequently catch a goon on the toilet, pistol in hand and trousers around ankles, delicate areas pixelated out. And indeed, it's the kind of game where a swift kick to the cubicle door will send their blood splattering across the porcelain. It is, we're pleased to report, exactly the game it looked in its debut at last summer's Devolver Direct. In play, *Anger*

*Foot* has the frantic strafing energy of *Doom* (1993 or 2016 — take your pick), the juvenile sense of humour of *Duke Nukem* (see 'Gag reflex'), and, yes, an awful lot of the game that made Devolver's name.

In many respects, this feels like *Hotline Miami* played from a firstperson perspective. It has the same short level format serving a 'try, try again' approach to encounter design. The same disposable weapons — guns come with a single clip so that they must be flung away once emptied, as in *The Matrix*'s lobby sequence. The same thrill — familiar to anyone who ever slipped on the Don Juan mask that turned doors into lethal weapons — of waiting beyond the threshold for precisely the right moment to detach wood from hinge and brain a goon standing on the other side.

The difference — and biggest drawback — brought by this perspective shift is that you can't actually see what's on the other side until the door is down and the bullets start flying. In these moments, when you can never be quite sure who'll come out of it alive until the gibs have settled, we can't help but wonder if *Anger Foot* is an entirely



ABOVE CENTRE Aside from *Hotline*, there's also a touch of *Superhot* to the repetitive structure, with memorised enemy placements essentially giving you the superpower of choreography. ABOVE The shoe comes off during interstitial narrative segments, where you're able to interact with your surroundings — wine glasses, telephones, your girlfriend's hair — using your bare toes







LEFT Challenges are designed to encourage replaying levels; completing them will unlock footwear with special abilities, from bullet-time to making doors explode



In case there was any doubt that *Anger Foot* was fully committed to the bit, the first set of levels culminates with you kicking an attack helicopter to death

fair game. While enemy placements are the same every time you restart, the levels don't so much run on clockwork as a drunken conga-line of cause and effect – though this unpredictability does at least run in both directions. The sole of your footwear,

### ***Levels don't so much run on clockwork as a drunken conga-line of cause and effect***

applied with a squeeze of the left trigger, will launch just about anything it touches: boomboxes, flopping mattresses, inbound grenades, even bodies. And even if enemies aren't being sent bundling into one another, they're often so eager to use their weapons on you that they'll end up putting a bullet in the back of their cohorts' heads instead.

This out-of-control nature might be our greatest weapon in *Anger Foot* – the thing that keeps us alive more often than skill or even memorisation – and indeed, the most potent in the game's own arsenal. It works in tandem with the pumping bass of the soundtrack to keep you on your toes, so to speak, and is a frequent source of laugh-out-loud Heath Robinson moments, as an incoming bullet pings off a flung weapon or a kicked object unexpectedly connects with a gas canister, sending it spiralling off before exploding. It's the kind of action that sneaks past our forebrain, putting us into exactly the right headspace for *Anger Foot*'s more abrasive aspects, at least for the duration of our demo. Yes, this is the product of both developer and publisher – there's no other word for it – devolving. But, after both have worked for years to go legit, that has a certain charm of its own. ■

### **Gag reflex**

Every aspect of *Anger Foot* seems to have been designed as an assault on the senses, the constant deluge of enemies splatting into thick ribbons of goo accompanied by an equally unrelenting soundtrack. Adrenalised ultraviolence is something to which we've become a bit desensitised over the years, though, and it's the game's sense of humour that has the potential to be more divisive. Certain enemies have oversized hands for heads, which inevitably give you the finger, while after battling knee-high sword-wielding mice, we enter a room furnished with mouse-sized urinals. As illustrated clear by the ever-present posters for 'Slime Fuckers', this feels like the game *High On Life* wanted to be. Selling point, or not? That's for you to decide.



## SILICA

Synergising shooting, strategy and science-fiction simulation

**A**s **Martin Melicharek** tells it, *Silica* needed a decade-long gestation. When he began toying with the FPS-RTS hybrid in 2008, he was, by his own admission, a little too ambitious. “It was meant to have a multitude of locations and feature a campaign that spanned several planets,” he says. “I was developing it on the *Doom 3* engine as a mod, but was inexperienced at the time, being 21, and the project did not go far.” After restarting development five years ago to tinker with it in his free time, Melicharek is still, perhaps surprisingly given its size, the project’s only developer (barring music duties). And while his improved technical chops have helped him to bring his idea to fruition, the recent revival of a beloved science-fiction IP might, by happenstance, have prepared the ground for its Early Access launch.

An inhospitable desert planet contested by interstellar humans and native aliens for its uniquely powerful natural energy source, *Silica*’s world smacks of Frank Herbert’s Arrakis. We’re not surprised when Melicharek says Westwood’s pioneering RTS *Dune II* was one of his major influences, though that only accounts for half of the experience. While one player takes the role of a strategic Commander, pulling the strings from above to construct buildings, harvest resources and recruit units, the rest of your team will fill out the boots on the ground. Infantry (riflemen, scouts, rocket-launcher-carrying heavies and long-range marksmen) double as deployable and playable units for the humans. The aliens, meanwhile, come in various iterations of Zerg-like bugs, from giant crabs to armoured behemoths.

“The important thing was not to force anyone to have to play RTS if they prefer FPS, and vice versa,” Melicharek says. For now, only one player per team can hop into the Commander’s chair, leaving the rest to play soldier. But even if you’re waiting to take the strategic reins, you feel like you’re making a vital contribution. “The thing that I find most important about the approach I’ve chosen with *Silica* is to keep true to each of the genres,”

Melicharek says. “I can’t stress that enough. I’ve encountered multiple iterations [of this hybrid genre] over the years which had either a watered-down FPS or a watered-down RTS. I’ve tried to keep as true as possible to each.”

**Just what that** means for the RTS side – outside of a resource-gathering, unit-building routine – isn’t abundantly clear from our hands-on session. But the FPS vision is more distinct. For all its science-fiction tailoring, the world feels grounded in reality when seen up close. Projectiles curve through the air, skirmishes pass through day-night cycles, and shells glance off tank armour if shot at the appropriate angle. It speaks to Melicharek’s experience working on the mil-sim series

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### ***We’re not surprised when Melicharek says Dune II was one of his major influences***

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*Arma*, as well as his time leading the development of space-rover simulator *Take On Mars*. “I went overboard there,” he says about its true-to-life physics modelling. “Yet even in *Silica*, I do try to create the feeling of authenticity, from the realistic ballistics to the vehicles being all driven by physics.”

He seems, though, to be working towards and around that commitment to simulation in equal measure. Dropped into a match of Strategy – the primary base-on-base game mode that will later be joined by co-op missions and standard deathmatch – we struggle to navigate the enormous, barren map on foot. Vehicles are therefore essential, as is a nifty teleporter that instantly zooms you to any point within the fog of war. It’s that unrelenting scale, Melicharek thinks, that sets *Silica* apart from other FPS-RTS hybrids. “The first time a Harvester drives by”, he says, “you do feel like a soldier caught in a futuristic war of a grand scale.” Even a decade on, then, he’s still reaching for lofty heights. ■



### **War path**

*Silica* will be the first game publicly released through Bohemia Interactive’s indie imprint, Bohemia Incubator. After Melicharek “showed [the game] to friend and CEO Marek Španěl by chance”, they agreed to reinvigorate the internal testing programme using *Silica* as a pilot. That has enabled Melicharek to create a barebones build, though he has a list of features he intends to implement during its 12 months in Early Access. Character customisation, loadout options, a communication menu to synergise the command and infantry levels, a mechanically unique second human faction, aerial vehicles, and jetpacks are all on the docket. Such a long list of asset-heavy ideas would usually make us wary, but given Melicharek has already come this far solo, we’re careful not to underestimate him.





TOP Monolithic structures, shapely space suits and holographic displays all combine into a jumble of science-fiction tropes. ABOVE On the ground, points can be spent at vendors to unlock specialist equipment. FAR LEFT You soon learn to keep your distance from the aliens, lest you take a trip into their toothy maws. LEFT Melicharek says that *Natural Selection 2* was a big influence, but while that game focused on fast-paced indoor skirmishes, *Silica* lets you loose outside



## ASTRONAUT: THE BEST

In space, no one can hear you make aeroplane noises

**O**n the main menu of Universal Happymaker's oddball narrative management sim is a button marked 'What have you done?' Clicking it brings up a list of your accomplishments, yet it's impossible not to read it as an accusation. Particularly since, as the new director of the Flaustrian Royal Space Academy, we already have some dubious 'achievements' to our name. Such as hiring a recruit fuelled exclusively by funnel cake. Agreeing to a test of loyalty involving a suspect and a cage of mongooses. Telling the press that a cadet, found confused and trouserless in an alley while clutching a match and a litre of gasoline, was lighting a bonfire to warm the homeless, having donated their nether garments to a street urchin.

These would-be spacefarers, in other words, are not Flaustria's best and brightest, coming with a string of randomised traits that make the genetic quirks of *Rogue Legacy*'s warriors look ordinary. Still, your employers are partly to blame. The five High Priests are keen to bring glory to this nation, but they're prone to making hasty judgements – such as

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***A cadet, found trouserless in an alley, was lighting a bonfire to warm the homeless***

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dismissing an astronaut with enviable attributes. Admittedly, a malfunctioning personality suppressor had exposed his all-too-human failings: it transpires that he only signed up for the space programme because the shape of the rocket and the vibrations on lift-off left him, well, *aroused*. The risk of public embarrassment was unacceptable.

As such, we're given only a few days to prepare two candidates for a TV appearance to prove the continuing validity of the FRSA, and put a sneering comedian on Flaustria's popular light-entertainment show All-Seeing Eye in his place. That explains why, as well as training them up on a simulator to test their

piloting skills, sending them to the classroom to study flight procedure and the gym to improve their fitness, we need to enrol them in charm school and give them a makeover.

Each activity involves clicking or holding the LMB: the longer you hold, the more intensive the training is, increasing your cadet's stats but with the risk of exertions taking their toll. The screen shakes the longer you keep the button pressed, and as you do, they're more likely to experience a wobble of their own: the chance of a breakdown increases if you push them too hard, leaving them unable to train for several days. Which, of course, makes them less likely to withstand the eventual rigours of space travel.

**If that wasn't** enough, you also need to appease your employers, since their confidence in the space programme determines their investment. Which means navigating a series of conflicting, sometimes baffling requests. Is it worth replacing instructional texts with romance novels just to curry favour with Morningdew? Then again, the cash might come in handy to bribe a Priest you've offended by not recruiting their choice of applicant.

Fortunately, your employers are happy to turn a blind eye to the curtained-off area behind your desk, where you can harness the power of the occult to boost your chances. Here, you can cast items into a cauldron to lower stress or heal an injury. Or perhaps to reveal a hidden trait that would normally be teased out via TV appearances. These foibles can, however, negatively affect existing stats.

When the big day arrives, we put our ace pilot Marina in the cockpit. Yet with the Maverick trait casting her as a loose cannon who refuses play by the rules, she unbuckles her seatbelt just before lift-off and is violently propelled into the nearest wall. The spin of a roulette wheel saves her from death, but her injuries mean she's out of commission for the rest of the journey. No matter. In charge of re-entry is – ah, the guy who doesn't know his left from his right. What *have* we done? ■



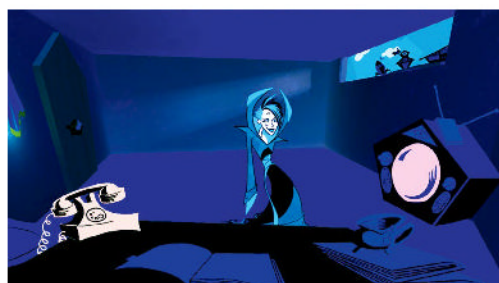
### Welcome to the multiverse

Whether you fail or complete your quest, you'll be visited by a leonine spectre who reveals that there are, in fact, many Flaustrias: you may have fulfilled your brief to venture into space, but you'll need to do more than survive re-entry if you're to fully resolve the nation's problems, not least its fierce rivalry with hated neighbour Vladagar. Each restart introduces an additional mission to overcome, while any glory gained from previous runs – even if ultimately lost through an astronaut dying or, worse, speaking out of turn – grants you lion coins. These can be spent on new items and challenges, such as equippable talismans and hexes to modify them. The finished game, we're told, will feature five of these procedurally generated episodic adventures.

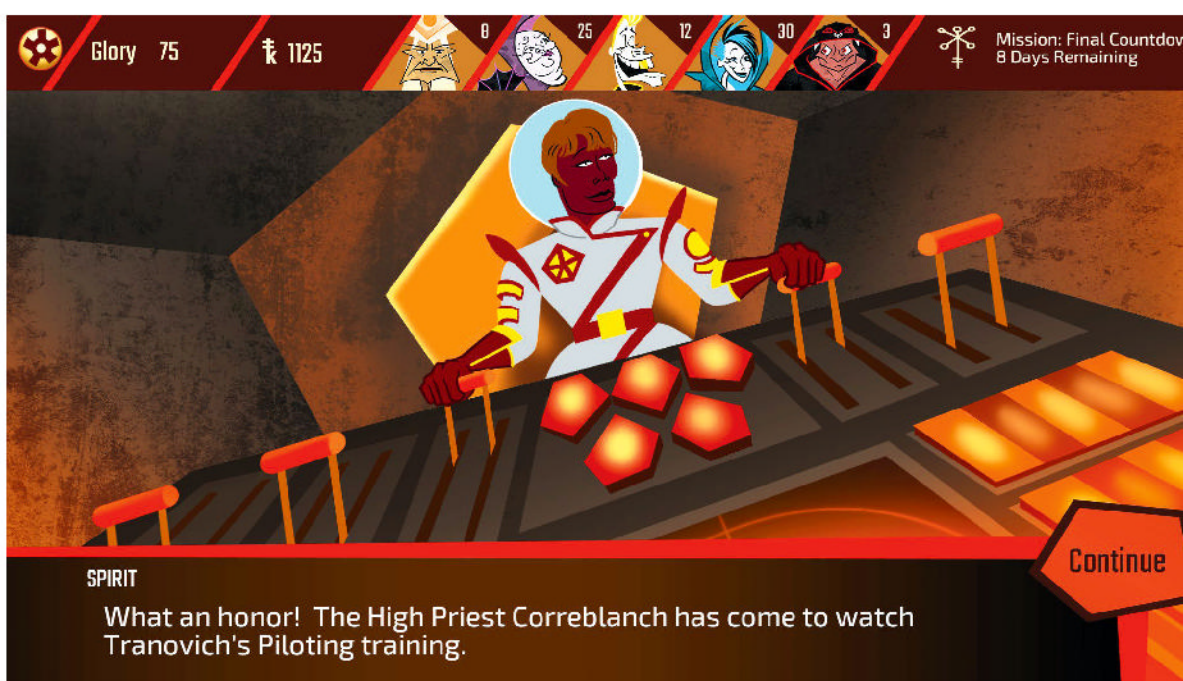




BELOW You can rename your astronauts – which makes it all the more entertaining when it's your friends and loved ones making a dreadful hash of things.  
 MAIN Sometimes High Priests will show up to watch cadets in training – if they perform well, your paymasters will view the programme more favourably (and fund it accordingly). The trade-off is that your character stats won't level up that session



TOP Training manages to make the act of holding down a mouse button quietly horrifying, as you keep it depressed and watch the astronauts' stress levels climb higher and higher.  
 ABOVE The art is delightful, and while animation is fairly basic, those limitations are often used for comedic effect: witness, for example, the way the Priests glide in and out of your office



SPIRIT

What an honor! The High Priest Correllanch has come to watch Tranovich's Piloting training.

Developer  
Deconstructeam  
Publisher  
Devolver Digital  
Format PC, Switch  
Origin Spain  
Release 2023



# THE COSMIC WHEEL SISTERHOOD

The arcane has never seemed so approachable



**T**he new game from the creator of cyberpunk narrative adventure *The Red Strings Club* demonstrates the value of lateral thinking about the language we use to describe videogames. This is not by any means a deck-builder in the traditional sense. And yet, setting aside the connotations of the term, it could accurately be described as such since the act of construction (as opposed to collection) is firmly at the forefront.

Fortuna, a young witch, has been exiled to an asteroid for 1,000 years for doom-laden fortune readings that left her coven in disarray. The conditions of her banishment preclude her from using her tarot cards. And so, with the assistance of a familiar named Àbramar, summoned from the depths of the infinite void, she begins to assemble a new deck. Here's where the building part comes in: choosing from a series of backdrops and features, you can design their layout, the elements and arrangements you select helping determine their powers – and, in turn, the readings you can give to Àbramar and any visitors who might be passing by your cosy little space rock.

---

***The card building process is a delight, and not just a way to personalise your collection***

---

But first comes some soul searching, as Àbramar – a fearsome but affable creature with too many arms and eyes, and a snake-like tail that encircles Fortuna's snug one-up-one-down – outlines the binding terms of their contract. It's a five-day process that begins with a getting-to-know-you interview of sorts. Four elemental seals (air, water, earth, fire) must be forged, based on your answers to the questions Àbramar sets, ones that will apparently affect your fate "dramatically".

Would you rather be feared, adored or pitied? Do you yearn for power, romance or knowledge? And is your source of determination the support of friends or the

desire to defeat your rivals? Your choices for these (and the bleak selection of potential sacrifices offered before the fire seal) will, you're told, be forever etched into the Cosmic Wheel. What that ultimately amounts to is unclear from our 90 minutes or so with the game, but then dabbling with occult forces in this way is all about embracing and finding meaning in the unknown.

**What is apparent** is that the card-building process is a delight, and not just a way to personalise your collection. At first, while selecting from the three elements that comprise a card – Sphere, Arcane and Symbol – you're limited by your energy supply, which is topped up by the type of reading you subsequently give. An intuitive interface lets you reshape, rotate and scale individual pieces, and also grab a selection when an assembly of pieces is as it should be but the position or size needs adjusting.

When you've finalised the design, sigils appear on certain objects, connected by red threads. The text description of the card makes plain that your choices have imbued it with multiple potential meanings, such as Leadership, Purpose, Justice, Predestination, Luck. By the time we get our first visitor – an arbiter from an organisation of former witches, tasked with investigating whether anyone is operating outside the law of a magical pact – we've got a grand total of three cards, though when giving her advice about her career your options are restricted by the card you pick out.

While the script is forthright and funny, *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* belongs to the new wave of introspective games spawned during the pandemic as developers sought to find creative outlets for their own feelings of isolation throughout lockdown. It's hard not to think, then, that we could all have done with a game like it a few years ago. If we possessed Fortuna's powers, we'd send it back in time. But even now, there is a sense of catharsis in its rituals, as its characters seek and provide answers to life's biggest quandaries. ■



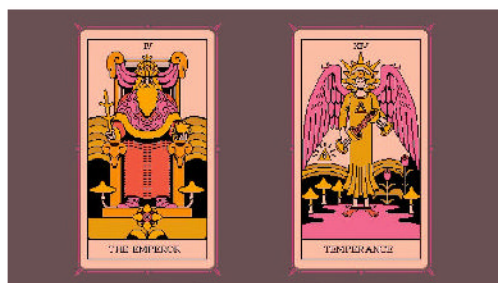
## The past within

There's an unexpected gear-shift in the game's second chapter, with a flashback to the time before Fortuna became a witch, as she sets out on a road trip with two close friends to watch a meteor shower. Here you revert to a more familiar tarot deck: though the designs are fixed, you're still able to pick where you want to assign them, as the well-meaning Eva ponders the world's future and how her actions might help affect change. It's not all doom and gloom, by any means: there's also a minigame where you arrange pizza toppings (using the same interface as the card assembly) and some eye-opening frank sex talk, which somehow avoids the eye-rolling naughtiness that usually results from videogame discussions of the subject.





LEFT Arbiter Thea appears to play a key role in the story beyond her early reading. BELOW The exchanges between Fortuna and her friends feel especially well observed and convincing, with few writerly flourishes



ABOVE It's not yet clear how significant an impact each reading has on the story, though in the sense that you're effectively confirming a person's hopes and fears, your choices feel significant. RIGHT At first, Fortuna is a little surprised by the way Abrammar speaks: forbidden creatures don't usually converse like human beings





## NIGHTHAWKS

The secret of vampires' existence is out. Now what?

This started as a homage to one of **Richard Cobbett's** favourite games. "I'd always loved *Vampire [The Masquerade]: Bloodlines*," he says. "I had joked about the idea: wouldn't it be awesome to have *Bloodlines* but in *Fallen London* style? And so that seemed like a fairly obvious thing to make."

Cobbett began his career writing about games for publications including **Edge** and PC Gamer, before contributing to games such as *Sunless Sea* and *Sunless Skies*. Creating his own text-based RPG seemed like a natural next step. At first it was something he experimented with as he learned how to use Unity, but then White Wolf, owner of the *Vampire: The Masquerade* IP, got in touch after seeing one of his tweets.

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**"I joked about it: wouldn't it be awesome to have *Bloodlines* but in *Fallen London* style?"**

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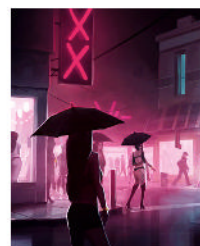
"Basically, I ended up making a pitch for a text-based *Vampire: The Masquerade* game," Cobbett says. "I never figured that they would accept – I genuinely didn't think there was a single chance in hell. I just thought, 'OK, well, it'll be fun, you know, to mentally play in their sandbox for a while.'" Sure enough, White Wolf turned down the pitch, so Cobbett decided to put his own spin on the idea.

Whereas *Vampire: The Masquerade* is all about keeping vampires hidden, in *Nighthawks* the secret is out. Eight years before the game begins, vampires were discovered, and society is going through tumultuous change. In the United States, the government offers to grant amnesty to those who reveal themselves and live as regular members of society. But they still need to drink blood. "That blood has to come from somewhere," Cobbett says. "And so some vampires are forced into hunting whether they like it or not, because they have to eat. Others can afford to buy it, and a lot of [blood] is being imported from poorer countries."

The game is set in a city where the first attempt at cohabitation between vampires and humans is taking place. "Nobody's happy about this," Cobbett says, explaining that the city is broke, and the government has threatened to cut off its funding if it doesn't become a testbed. You play a young, penniless vampire who ends up running a nightclub called *Nighthawks* after making a deal with the human owner. Your vampire blood is the only thing that can keep his terminal cancer at bay, but infusing it comes at a cost: he can no longer sleep, and slowly becomes subservient.

***Nighthawks* takes place** across six acts, most of which last for one month, and although each act has a story-related objective to complete before time runs out, you have freedom to explore the city and pursue side stories. Some involve recruiting companions, such as a tough vampire who runs a fight club but is secretly into opera. Companions can be romanced, or die, and the choices you make along the way have a dramatic influence.

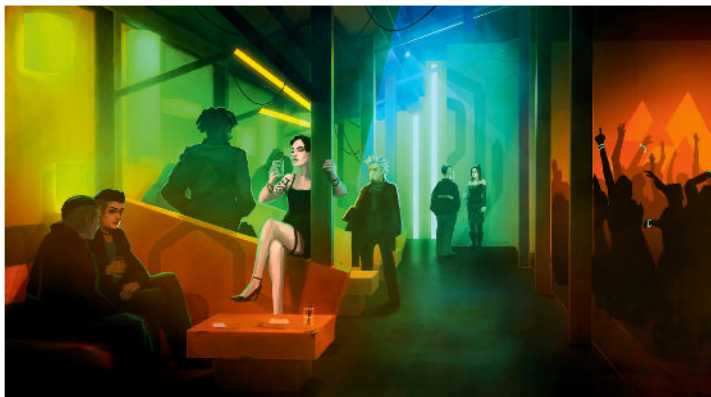
Cobbett has found the game's reliance on text rather than visuals to be freeing. There's even a document on his computer called 'Things *Bloodlines 2* Won't Do': sequences that might be too gruesome, subtle or awkward to depict in graphical form. "We can have the little moments like where the character doesn't quite meet your eyes," he says. "We can do all these details that you would have to have incredible-quality 3D models to be able to pull off." He has also adopted a playful attitude to vampire lore, such as the vampire who complains they were run over because a driver couldn't see them in their rear-view mirror. "I tried to find interesting spins on the classic mythology," Cobbett says. "Your average vampire story is very cold, it's very cynical – it's about the difficulty of living as a monster. *Nighthawks* does have that, but for me, the more interesting stories are the warmer ones. A running theme throughout the game is: the night is dark, but tomorrow can be better." ■



### Skip to the end

The majority of *Nighthawks* is text-based, accompanied by mostly static backgrounds and characters drawn by Ben Chandler of Wadjet Eye. But occasionally the narrative will be broken up by card-based combat. Cobbett hopes that the combat will add spice and variety, but it was also important to him to let players skip it entirely. "I've played a lot of RPGs in my time," he says. "I have played a lot of really shitty fighting minigames. So I am doing what I have long wanted a lot of other people to do: you can press a button and you can win any fight. If you don't care, not a problem – you have my blessing to skip the combat section that I have worked very hard on, and just get back to the story and the vampire stuff, and trying to have sex with as many people as possible."





TOP *Nighthawks* was announced as a Kickstarter campaign in 2018, with a total of \$136,128 pledged against an initial goal of \$125,000. ABOVE "One of the fun things you can do when you're a text game," Cobbett says, "is that you can make for much more interesting, funny romance sequences"



TOP Cobbett says that the text interface means he can explore things that might feel "tacky and awkward" if they were shown graphically. ABOVE The game is described as a text-based RPG rather than a visual novel. "That is not because I have anything against visual novels," Cobbett says. "I just think that the feel isn't really what you'd get from the average visual novel in terms of how much choice you have." LEFT Cobbett says he's "a compulsive overwriter". The game's word count currently stands at around 750,000



ROUNDUP

## HARMONY: THE FALL OF REVERIE

Developer/publisher Don't Nod Format PC, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series Origin France Release June



Having watched Deck Nine introduce to *Life Is Strange* a protagonist who can see people's emotions, Don't Nod's handsomely presented visual novel almost feels like an attempt at oneupmanship – after all, its own lead can see emotions as people. Or, more precisely, aspirations – returning home to search for her missing mother, Polly is whisked to another realm via a magic necklace, where she meets Bliss and Power personified, representing diverging paths spreading out from the first of many choices that lead to a range of potential destinies. Which, if nothing else, should give this earnest-seeming tale plenty of replay value.

## IMMORTALS OF AVEUM

Developer Ascendant Publisher EA Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series Origin US Release July 20



"Doom and I are old friends," a character says in Ascendant Studios' magic-themed FPS. We can tell: this EA Original sits at the intersection of *Id*'s shooter and *Ghostwire: Tokyo*, as you fire colourful spells that function much like weapons (red: shotgun, green: SMG, blue: rifle) with flashy hand gestures for specials and traversal abilities, such as an ethereal grapple. The action has spectacle to spare, but a glimpse of the loot menu soon turns our coos to sighs.

## UNDERGROUND BLOSSOM

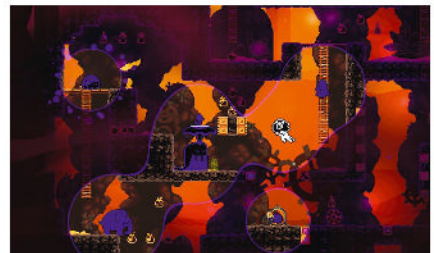
Developer/publisher Rusty Lake Format Android, iOS, PC Origin The Netherlands Release 2023



Rusty Lake's newest point-and-click puzzler brilliantly captures the cursed ambience of a near-empty Tube station. The train carries you through key moments in Laura Vanderboom's life: we first see her as a baby, whose nappy, in keeping with the series' dream logic, is repurposed as an improvised explosive.

## KARMAZOO

Developer Pastagames Publisher Devolver Digital Format PC, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series Origin France Release Summer



Devolver x Pastagames? That's a team-up to savour. This co-op platformer is two parts *Pix The Cat* to one part *Journey*; with no voice chat, experienced players act as sherpas, using their knowledge and communication tools to guide novices through hectic arcade-style challenges, earning karma for their efforts.

## PÂQUERETTE DOWN THE BUNBURROWS

Developer Bunstack Publisher Abiding Bridge Format PC Origin France Release 2023



This puzzler tasks its pixel-art protagonist with capturing rabbits, which scamper off when she approaches. Knowing they turn left when hitting a junction allows you to cut them off, leading them into dead-ends so they can be gathered up. Traps and carrots come in handy for the larger warrens.



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Veera Hokkanen, Housemarque



“The attention you give to a speaker and subject matter when you’re sitting in the room at Develop, you digest a lot more and that’s good. I want to be focused on what the speaker is saying, taking that time to improve my craft and learn from others – I think that’s important.”

Dinga Bakaba, Arkane Lyon

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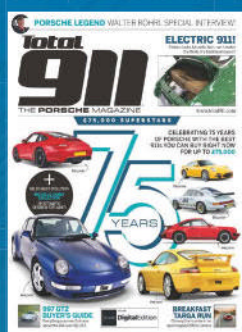
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# #385

VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY



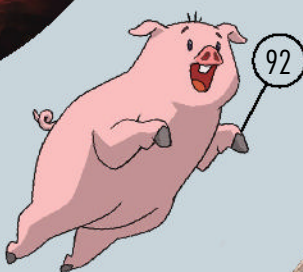
50



78



68



92



124



86

- 50 Seeking Solis
- 68 Divide And Conquer
- 78 Fear The Old Blood
- 86 The Making Of... Card Shark
- 92 Studio Profile: League Of Geeks
- 124 Time Extend: Pathologic 2



# S E E K I N G S O L I S

How an indie studio fulfilled its plan to deliver a TV-quality sci-fi thriller – with the help of two of videogames' brightest stars

By CHRIS SCHILLING



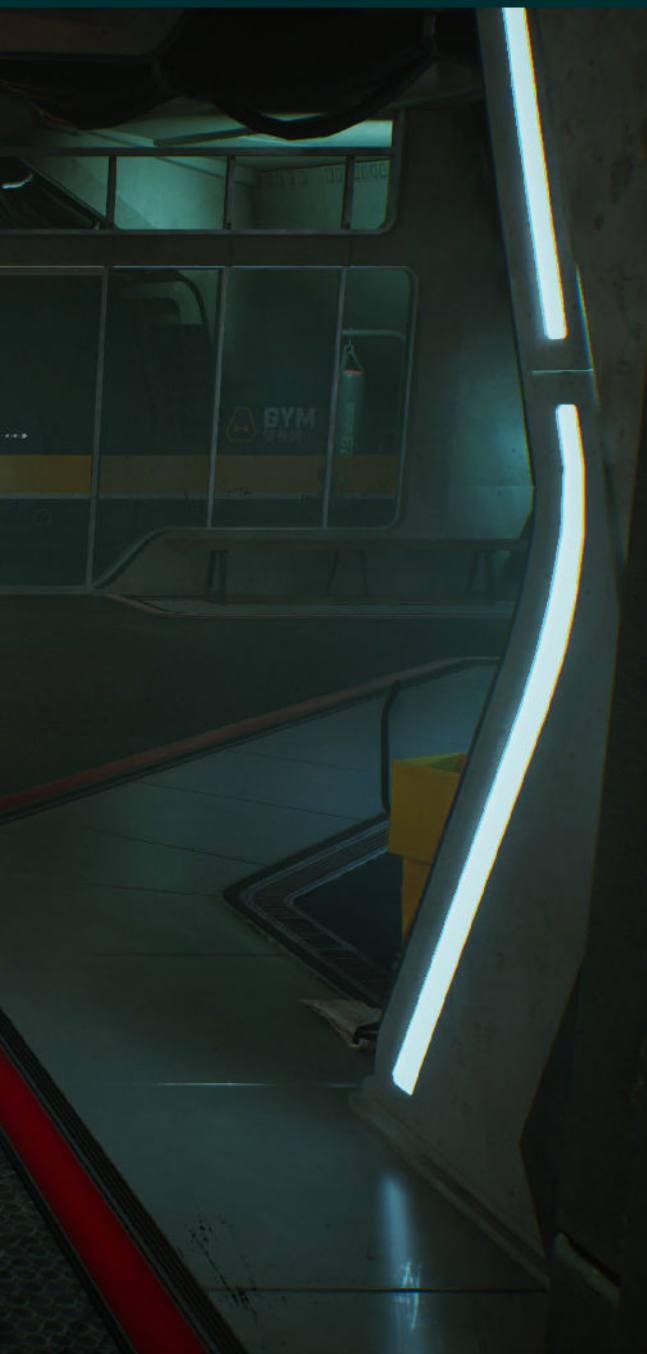
**Game** Fort Solis  
**Developer** Fallen Leaf,  
Black Drakkar Games  
**Publisher** Dear Villagers  
**Format** PC, PS5  
**Release** Q3



INSPIRED BY THE STORYTELLING OF THE BEST SHOWS HE SAW, TINSDALE IMAGINED TAKING A TV-QUALITY STORY IN THE OTHER DIRECTION

Leary's warned not to remove his helmet, but notes that the station's backup generators can supply stable levels of oxygen. The choice to take it off has dangerous ramifications





Maintenance engineer Jack Leary is working the graveyard shift at Prospect One, a remote mining outpost on Mars, when he receives a red alert from the nearby station of Fort Solis. Suspicious that it was manually activated rather than automated, he calls in to request a response; when that isn't forthcoming, he tells colleague Jessica Appleton that he's heading over to investigate. With storm warnings incoming, he hops inside a bulky rover to drive the short distance to the other base, the audio score as the vehicle trundles toward its destination making it clear he's unlikely to receive a warm welcome. The signs, then, are already ominous when, shortly after his arrival, he delivers a dire warning over the radio to his co-worker: "Jess... Solis... we are not alone!" But then he immediately breaks into laughter. He's only kidding. Everything's fine. For now.

It's not the only time we're wrongfooted during our hands-on time with a game that's pitched, tellingly, as a 'singleplayer thirdperson thriller'. Despite initial appearances to the contrary – and subsequent discoveries that heighten the sense of apprehension, well before we discover bloodied bandages on an office desk and a red handprint smeared on a pair of surgical curtains in the medbay – this is not *that* kind of science-fiction horror. We might naturally stiffen slightly in anticipation as we advance down a narrow passageway, illuminated only by the flashlight on our spacesuit, but we soon realise we're not going to see alien tentacles bursting out of a vent, or stumble across a corpse that suddenly sprouts arachnid legs and scuttles towards us. Sure, *something* out of the ordinary is going on here. But that mystery forms the basis for a story that, while set on the Red Planet, hits much closer to home. The computerised voice response to your first attempts to enter the titular facility spells it out: "Lockdown in full effect".

**It's no surprise**, in other words, when game director **James Tinsdale** tells us that the idea for *Fort Solis* began to germinate during the early months of COVID-19. With plenty of time on his hands, Tinsdale spent a good deal of it watching shows on streaming services such as Netflix. "I think everybody watched, like, the first episode of everything that was on there, as we ran out of stuff to watch," he smiles. "But there are so many good storytellers on there." Since then, he notes, HBO's *The Last Of Us* has seen the game series enter the broader cultural zeitgeist. But, inspired by the storytelling of the best shows he saw, Tinsdale imagined taking a TV-quality story in the other direction: "Wouldn't it be cool using today's technology just to move into that space with a game?" Looking for comparison points, he didn't see too many for a small developer with the production values he was after: the kind that would allow him to tell a human story ►



James Tinsdale, *Fort Solis* game director

with authentic-feeling characters. The kind more commonly associated with a much larger team. “But we felt if we could create something truly immersive visually, we could have something really compelling.”

Like the game, the story of *Fort Solis*’s development started with two people: Tinsdale and art director Mark Cushley. With both boasting plenty of industry experience, including work on triple-A games (Tinsdale spent time at Asobo Studio, while Cushley is an alumnus of Traveller’s Tales and Evolution Studios), they were able to plot out the type, scope and size of game they could reasonably build with a relatively small team. Two became three, with the addition of senior technical animator Matt Lake; and then four, as producer Max Barton came aboard. After about six months, they were able to secure investment and hire more: currently, Fallen Leaf is up to a still-modest ten staff between its Liverpool and Warsaw locations. Those Polish connections afforded the studio the opportunity to outsource some parts of development to another Warsaw-based team at Black Drakkar Games, with another dozen staff working on the game there.

It’s an unusual setup, albeit one that’s firmly in the spirit of international collaboration we associate with space exploration. “We knew we wouldn’t be able to just staff up overnight,” Tinsdale says. “It’s very difficult to attract people to what is essentially a new studio with a brand-new idea. It’s a big leap.” Indeed, one key member of the team who made that leap of faith was technical director Simon Bratel, who came on board having spent time at Rockstar working on the hugely anticipated *Grand Theft Auto VI*. This particular insight brings to mind the Mark Twain quote that opens *Fort Solis* — one that fits both the story it’s telling and the developer’s bold ambitions: “Courage is not the lack of fear, it is acting in spite of it”.

**Indeed, a degree** of bravery was required for the next step in the process: casting. *Fort Solis* is effectively a three-hander, albeit with one of the trio kept largely out of sight — at least for the early part of the game. For protagonist Jack Leary and his fascinatingly ambiguous foil, medical officer Wyatt Taylor, Tinsdale decided to shoot for the Moon — after all, Duncan Jones’ film was the kind of low-budget, high-impact sci-fi tale he was hoping to make. For **Roger Clark**, still best known for playing outlaw protagonist Arthur Morgan in *Red Dead Redemption II*, the opportunity to take on another lead role was a no-brainer. “I couldn’t say no, because it was an opportunity to do something completely different,” he says in his warm Irish-American brogue, which he retains for his role as Leary. “And to show the fanbase that I’ve been lucky enough to show my work to that there’s more to life than just being a cowboy.”

He was compelled, too, by the news of who he’d be working alongside — a man he says he’s been studying for years. “My wife says it’s just playing videogames — I call it research,” he laughs. “That’s what I tell the IRS as well.” That man is, of course, **Troy Baker** — a performer, you’d imagine, who’s prominent and established enough to have his pick of the scripts that come his way. “Oh, boy. Will you pass that rumour along to the rest of the industry?” Baker grins, before an abrupt Lampardian transition as he outlines what drew him to *Fort Solis*. “I have discovered for myself that I am able to make more informed decisions, and ultimately the relationship gets better, when I get to talk to the creatives as early and as much as possible.”

Perhaps surprisingly, the first thing Baker wanted to know about wasn’t, in fact, his character. “When James approached my team about this, I wanted to find out: what is the experience? What is it you’re trying to make?” Baker explains. “Because I want to find out if I can get behind the project. The character is always kind of something that is easier for me to find my way into. But what is the project? What is this experience that we’re trying to create together?” It’s an understandable perspective, since this is new territory for both *Fort Solis*’s developer and its stars. And the game, admittedly, is still somewhat of an unknown quantity to a lot of people. “The verbs are always important” was Baker’s instant response when Geoff Keighley asked him about it onstage at Summer Game Fest 2022 when the game’s initial trailer debuted. (Without Baker and Clark being present, you sense it might otherwise have become a little lost amid the glut of science-fiction games showcased at the event.) Exploring, discovering and traversing were the three Baker ultimately came up with, but the inference we drew at the time — correctly, it turns out — is that story is king here.

*Fort Solis*’s opening chapters contain all three of those verbs, with the first two present in greater proportion to the third — unless you consider walking traversal on more than a technicality. But perhaps we should, since that seems most instructive: without seeking to use the label in the pejorative sense, this is as close to a walking simulator as it is to, say, *Dead Space*. At least for the game’s first couple of hours, Fallen Leaf answers the question of what a sci-fi survival horror might feel if the latter element were stripped out entirely. The focus, instead, shifts towards finding out what exactly happened here — the common narrative foundation of many a genre piece, but one that in videogames is usually interrupted by combat and the occasional distraction of resource-gathering and upgrading. It’s not quite true to say there’s *none* of that here, but you’ll be spending most of your time picking your way slowly around rooms and corridors, opening some locked doors via computers, and locating power cells for others.



FOR ROGER CLARK, STILL BEST KNOWN FOR  
PLAYING ARTHUR MORGAN, THE OPPORTUNITY  
OF ANOTHER LEAD ROLE WAS A NO-BRAINER

## MARTIAN ARTS

Since the element of surprise is one of the main weapons of any thriller, we're reluctant to go into too much detail about the story – though Baker and Clark have already revealed that their characters come to blows, and the former in particular is keen to highlight the effort that went into making that fight feel convincing. "We brought in Nathaniel Martin, who was our stunt coordinator. I'll never forget, he walked into our green room and he goes, 'Good morning, gentlemen, please tell me the story you would like to tell in this fight'. And Roger and I kinda look at each other like, well, shit, man, we never thought about it in *those* terms before." The two explained their characters, and Martin returned an hour later with a plan. "He came back with this *ballet*," Baker says, though he admits he wasn't convinced he'd be able to pull it off. "But I'll be damned, man, by the end of the day he had us doing every step of that ballet."

Tinsdale on the early exchanges between Leary and Appleton: "You don't want a silent radio, because how do you build a character in silence? I wanted to write engaging, relatable dialogue"



A SERIES OF STRANGE OCCURRENCES LEAD  
LEARY TO THE REALISATION THAT HE WAS  
RIGHT THE FIRST TIME: HE'S NOT ALONE





The much-vaunted fight between Clark and Baker's characters serves as a release valve for the steadily building tension. But the air is let out only briefly, as events take a turn for the unexpected



"WE ALL KNOW THAT FEELING, AND IT STILL SENDS A SHIVER DOWN MY SPINE. I THINK A LOT OF THAT TRAUMA IS STILL BEING PROCESSED"



TOP This wrist-mounted device lets you rewatch video logs you've found. ABOVE Outdoor exploration is limited: Leary's drive between stations is automated and happens during the opening credits. RIGHT It may look like Leary has clonked his shin on a coffee table, but the reality is a bit more dramatic





That in itself is absorbing, not least because the base itself is realised so convincingly. Belying *Fallen Leaf*'s limited means, these recently vacated spaces bear comparison to the kind of luxuriously detailed settings you'd expect from studios with vastly superior resources, with a clear goal of reaching triple-A standards. Leary's measured movements, which reflect his advancing years without leaving him feeling too heavy or unresponsive in the hands, encourage you to take your time – giving you the chance to linger in a circular lobby with a sakura tree at its centre, for example, while chugging a beer from a nearby vending machine if you fancy. Points of interest are unobtrusively highlighted by small circles that widen as you approach, making it obvious what you can study more closely or interact with directly as you venture into crew quarters and offices, rummaging through belongings for clues. You'll find a whiteboard in one room, with a reminder handwritten in marker pen to call home on a specific date. There's a fully interactive Rubik's Cube in another – solvable in hands less rusty than ours. You'll see plants, snacks, tools of the trade, photographs of loved ones. And, most significantly, you'll find video messages, which gradually fill you in on what went wrong at Fort Solis.

**It's through these** that we're first introduced to Baker's character. Behind those stern features, Fort Solis medical officer Wyatt Taylor is initially a sympathetic figure, as we see him express concerns about his fellow workers, who, despite the risk of radiation exposure, have been working longer hours at their exterior posts. But it's in a medical log – designed, as he outlines, as a mental-health aid – that he lays bare his own feelings in a scene that feels all too relatable. "I just... I need to spend time with my family," he sighs, sadly. "And not just watch them... through a screen." Understatedly moving, it's some of Baker's finest videogame work to date.

While both male leads credit Tinsdale with affording them the leeway to improvise and adapt elements of the script as they grew into their characters and played off one another, Baker says that not a word of this particular scene was changed. "Look, it's easy to say, 'Right, let's do a pandemic special'; but the foundational things that exist outside of the event, the isolation and feeling alone – people understand that feeling," he says. "One of the best pieces of writing advice I've ever gotten is 'don't be clever, just be honest'. And the only thing that we had to convey in this one scene was that this guy feels alone."

Nor did Baker have to dig too deep to tap into the emotion of the moment. He alludes to the "collateral damage" that comes with working in videogames: whether building a studio or spending time away in a mocap studio, everyone has had to spend time away from their families. "And that's

who we're doing it for!" Baker continues. "James being a father, me being a father, Roger being a father, understanding what it's like. There's this one line that he says where it's like, 'Their smiles. I just wish I could bottle that up'. So you understand this guy is just at the most desperate place in his life. And this was happening to me when finally the world opened back up and I spent about 40 per cent of the year away. So when we go to shoot that scene, there was no acting, it was just: change my name for that guy's name, and that was it. It's one of those scenes where I'm forever grateful to James for allowing me to have it because I think it was cathartic for both of us." Tinsdale, far from sunny South California in Liverpool's Baltic Triangle, nods in agreement.

Clark, too, found some similarities between his real-life experiences and those of his character – even though their circumstances are obviously very different. Here, the 'graveyard shift' Leary is working (and if you're familiar with the origins of that term, the first mention of it here is laden with heavy portent) refers to the point at which Mars is farthest away from Earth in its orbit: the skeleton crew left behind for maintenance are simply waiting for the planets to align more closely so that the usual trade routes can be re-established. Even with a workmate to trade banter with – and his repartee with Appleton is an early highlight – there is a sense of isolation Clark could easily identify with from the outset. "Not to give too much of Jack's personal history away, but there's something that he's running away from," Clark says. "So he's in this place with very limited social interaction, and he's ready to go back when a little snag gets thrown in the spokes. But we all know that feeling now, and it still sends a little bit of a shiver down my spine. Like, I think a lot of that trauma is still being processed by us as a society. So I was able to bring a lot of that to Jack, absolutely without question."

**That sense of** desperation comes to a head toward the end of our time with the game, as a series of strange occurrences lead Leary to the realisation that he was right the first time: he's *not* alone. There are action beats, which range from diving out of the way of a falling platform to a sudden race against time as gas pours into the station, forcing Leary to hurry to the lobby to retrieve his helmet and avoid contamination. There's a confrontation, too (see 'Martial arts'), though you're not suddenly granted the control you might associate with, say, a thirdperson brawler. Rather, this sequence is akin to a QTE, which seems to result in the same outcome even when we whiff a couple of inputs.

For some, that might be a deal breaker. It certainly takes us a moment to adjust, to rewire our expectations of the type of game this is. Perhaps we've visited so many abandoned space stations in our time that we're simply not



Roger Clark plays engineer Jack Leary

accustomed to exploring one unarmed, or at least being in a position to properly retaliate when threatened. But *Fort Solis* isn't purposely deceptive, trying to hide what it really is. And while at first we're convinced that the game's more action-focused elements are a somewhat rudimentary way to add variety or provide a change of pace, we realise it's a matter of the individual moments serving the wider story. Leary is simply acting as anyone would in these situations, which in the context of the narrative and the setting feels entirely plausible, and so it makes sense to give the player some involvement in that to deepen their connection to him. And, to a point, his environment: there's a pleasing tactility and heft to the more quotidian interactions, such as pumping a handle repeatedly to manually open the site's enormous exterior bulkhead doors.

The game's approachability is partly a practical concern — "I don't have ten designers, right?" Tinsdale smiles — but it's also a matter of pacing and purpose. "There's always a temptation to add content that doesn't necessarily have the right meaning: it's just there because we felt we needed more inputs or interactions per minute, whatever you want to call it," he continues. "And I think we've taken the opposite approach. I've tried to abstain. I've said: if it doesn't further the story, further the atmosphere or the current moment, then just leave it out. And if our players respond to it, that's great. But I certainly don't want one of our bigger moments to happen and then the next thing you're messing around with a minigame." As such, certain interactions that might be available in one chapter will be switched off in another, a decision Tinsdale acknowledges might be controversial for some players who want more input, regardless of whether or not it fits the moment. So while it's natural that Leary might take the time to fiddle with a Rubik's Cube when he's pottering about an apparently empty station, when his situation becomes more perilous, it makes sense that he's no longer able to stop and take time out to solve it. "We're like, let's get some dialogue lines in there and create something more interesting [instead]," Tinsdale explains.

There is also a desire to keep things straightforward for the very audience that might have tuned into movie and TV streaming services when lockdown began. And those who might now, as the world has opened up once more, be looking for something of a similar storytelling standard — but without the associated time investment a multi-season show might demand. "People who are looking to have that investment towards a Netflix/Amazon-style show — you know, four to eight hours, high-quality stuff, where they feel they got value for money," Tinsdale adds. "It's not a 20-hour [game]. That's probably not the audience that is going to lock into our experience. Though they're more than welcome if they want to."



Baker: "Craig Mazin said that mystery is good, confusion is bad. I hope players end up asking more questions. That's not a bug, that's a feature to say: now where does this go? What happens now?"



"I CERTAINLY DON'T WANT ONE OF OUR BIGGER MOMENTS TO HAPPEN AND THEN THE NEXT THING YOU'RE MESSING AROUND WITH A MINIGAME"

## SCRIPT DOCTOR

Both actors say that Tinsdale was happy to defer to their expertise whenever they felt adjustments were required. "I've learned over the years," Baker begins. "At first I was like: 'This line needs to change'. And it was actually working with Neil Druckmann [that changed my approach]. He was like, 'Maybe let's ask questions first, and say: why this line? Why this person? Why now?' And find out maybe there's something about the character or the story or the scene that I don't fully understand. The problem is, especially when your director is your writer, there can be a wall of ego that comes up, and they're very dogmatic and very reticent to change things. And to James' credit, he really was like, 'Look, I'm gonna lean on you guys. This is the story that I want to tell, but ultimately it's you who are going to be enacting this, so if you feel that there's a better way to do it, go for it.'"



## SEEKING SOLIS



Tinsdale says the modern trend towards movie trailers that effectively amount to a two-minute condensed version of the entire plot is partly why *Fallen Leaf* has opted not to give too much away



THERE'S A PLEASING TACTILITY TO THE MORE  
QUOTIDIAN INTERACTIONS, SUCH AS PUMPING  
A HANDLE TO OPEN THE BULKHEAD DOORS



"I THINK IF WE GO DENSE AND DEEP RATHER  
THAN WIDE, THAT IS WHAT ACTUALLY GIVES  
A FAR MORE FULFILLING EXPERIENCE"



Clark on the challenge of authentic performance: "We're all experts on being human; audiences can sniff that out. You can't hide behind the facade of some expertise only you are privy to"



## RADIO EDIT

She might not be physically present for the first two chapters, but Julia Brown has a crucial role as Jessica Appleton, communicating with Leary across the airwaves throughout the early game. At times we're reminded of *Firewatch* – though in this case it's a firmly platonic relationship. But their good-natured badinage is similarly witty, while surreptitiously smuggling in exposition to establish the narrative background. "I thought that was really well done, the way it's camouflaged into the banter," Clark says. "But it's also a trap, right?" Baker interjects. "You have to set up the world, and it's [difficult] to avoid the temptation of the expositional Sarlacc pit. Because it's incredibly important to understand that these are real people in a real place going through a real thing. So it's about making every conversation be purposeful. And that onus was really on Julia – she was the main person who was like, 'Fuck, I have to make this really sound believable.'"

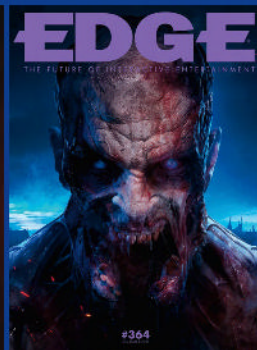
"The thing that impressed me about James and his team was that, from the outset, they knew the target. They knew *exactly* the experience they wanted to create," Baker says. "They knew how they were going to get there, they understood the size of the studio that they were, the size of the game that it could [realistically] make, and they never wavered from it." Clark nods in agreement: "They knew what this was, and they didn't try to bite off more than they could chew, which I think is a very wise decision for a brand-new studio. And, you know, what we're starting to see is that the videogame industry has gotten so big now, and we're getting a little bit more specific in our tastes, and in the ways that we tell stories." And in the way we experience them, too: he says that he particularly enjoyed playing *Stray*, which wasn't too taxing or time-consuming to finish. "I don't want to be presumptive," Clark adds, "but people our age, they're looking for something that you can binge in one night or get done in a weekend."

**Clearly, the implication** is that *Fort Solis* can be precisely that kind of game. Not a game that takes over your life, but one that can leave you satisfied nonetheless: Tinsdale outlines the attempts to make it as "unbloated as possible", while Clark describes it as a "taut thriller". Baker goes a step further. "It's more: we're not painting, we're sculpting, and we're just trying to chisel away," he says. "It's like what they said about [Michelangelo's] *La Pietà*: chisel away everything that's not Jesus." If there's grandiosity to some of Baker's pronouncements, it's backed up by his unswerving, infectious belief in the power and potential of interactive storytelling. "The common denominator for everybody is that we want an experience that moves us," he says. "Something that speaks to the human condition."

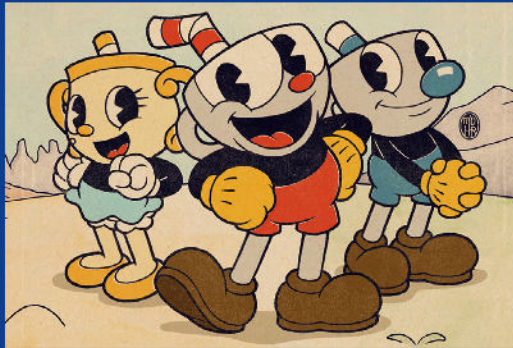
As if to illustrate that you don't need a 30-hour game with a nine-figure budget to achieve that, he goes on to wax lyrical about Playdead's *Inside*, and how highly regarded it is among his industry peers. "People say it's one of the best things they played in the last ten years, and it's two hours long!" As with *Fort Solis*, he notes, a significant amount of *Inside*'s development time was evidently spent refining and polishing; where many developers seek to add value through addition, Playdead's game is a quintessential example of accomplishing the same through subtraction. Whether *Fort Solis* can scale similar heights to that modern classic remains to be seen, but Baker is certainly bullish about its chances of success. "I think if we go dense and deep rather than wide, that is what actually gives a far more fulfilling experience," he says. "Players are hopefully not going to say, 'It's too short,' but rather, 'Man, I'm full! Well, yeah – because what we gave you was dense. We're trying to create a neutron star, not a black hole.'"



Troy Baker plays the volatile Wyatt Taylor



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# DIVID CONQU





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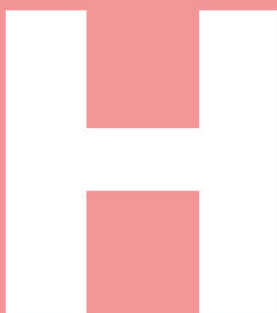
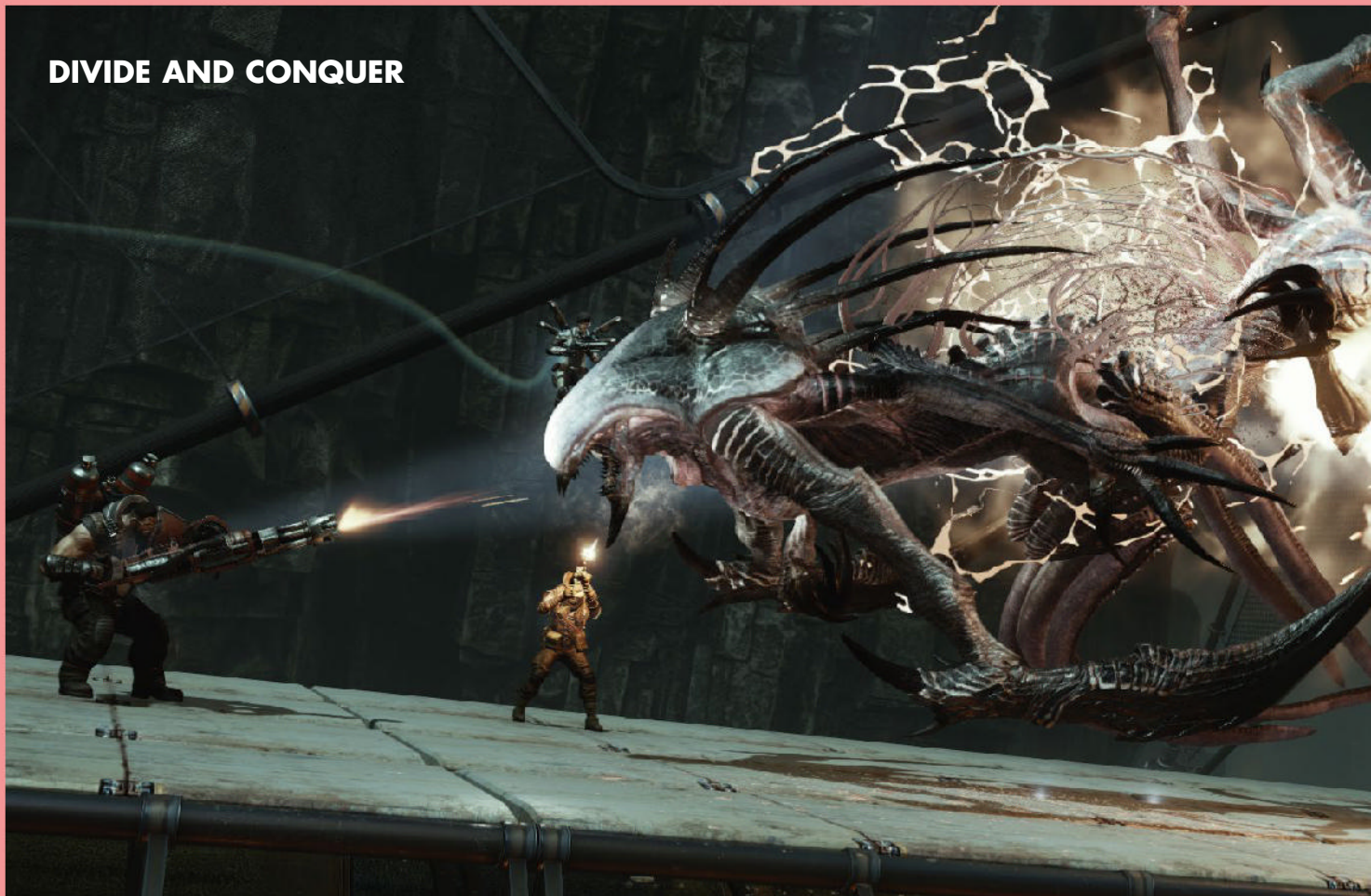
Weighing up the delicate imbalance of asymmetrical multiplayer

By **NIAL O'DONOGHUE**

Illustration Ollie Hoff

EDGE

## DIVIDE AND CONQUER



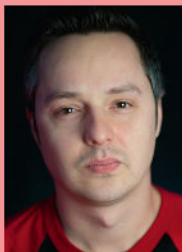
Humans, to borrow a cliché from horror and sci-fi, are the real monsters. It was a phrase that Turtle Rock took to heart when developing *Evolve*, the studio's first game after parting ways with Valve following the development of *Left 4 Dead*. Like that game, this 2015 creature feature had four players, in classic FPS mode, working together against a monstrous foe: a lone kaiju, piloted in thirdperson view by a fifth player. This brought a marked change of pace for both sides – there's no mistaking the difference between fighting an AI monster and one controlled by another human.

In some ways, *Evolve* was a high-water mark for asymmetrical design – an entire game built out of the principles of *L4D*'s Versus mode, which saw players controlling zombies in a firstperson perspective, coming from a major publisher, 2K. It was successful, too, shipping 2.5m copies in the first few months after release, with 2K declaring it a “key long-term franchise”.

Yet part of the reason it remains a high-water mark is that, today, asymmetry is firmly the exception rather than the rule in videogames – something that might be attributed to *Evolve* itself. In the end, 2K's big plans never came to fruition, and the game abandoned its upfront cost in 2016, transitioning to a free-to-play model before being delisted in 2018.

Of course, this isn't the only kind of asymmetry available to multiplayer designers. Take, for example, *Total War: Warhammer*, whose fantastical setting allows Creative Assembly to clearly distinguish each faction. Or, indeed, the roster of a *Street Fighter* game, where characters' different specialisms are expressed through input styles (think of Ryu's quarter-circles versus Guile's charge moves) and one-off mechanics (such as *SF6*'s Jamie, able to power up his moves by pausing to drink from a flask). This might be thought of as a kind of second-order style of asymmetry, however – one where all players share most of the same design essentials, but given their own flavour depending on their chosen character.

Designing for *Evolve*'s monsters, however, was an entirely different kettle of fish. “You have different expectations, there are different animation requirements, movement requirements – there's quite a bit of consideration between the two [camera perspectives],” says studio design director **Brandon Yanez**. “You'll spend a lot of time making a firstperson shooter feel really good, and then it takes almost an equal amount of time to make a thirdperson camera feel really good.” Reflecting on the game now, he acknowledges the flaws that resulted from this strict design



Brandon Yanez, design director at Turtle Rock





challenge. Hunters, he feels, are too reliant on perfect harmony: if just one player fails to do their part well, the whole team falls apart. Yet, when facing off against a well-drilled squad, monsters can feel bullied.

Nonetheless, Yanez still speaks passionately about *Evolve*, and eagerly jumped back in when the game's servers were reactivated last year at the request of fans. (The game, however, remains delisted on Steam.) But the spirit of *Evolve* lives on in Turtle Rock's *Back 4 Blood*, which features its own asymmetrical mode pitting teams of human 'cleaners' against hordes of ghoulish 'ridden', the latter controlled from an over-the-shoulder camera. Players take turns duking it out in arenas custom built to accommodate both viewpoints.

When we ask Yanez if Turtle Rock will continue to create asymmetrical modes in its games, though, his answer is uncertain. "We could have probably had a much bigger, robust multiplayer experience [in *Back 4 Blood*] if we didn't have to put so many resources into reimagining what each monster would play like," he says. "I like the uniqueness of it, but I recognise that some people might be overwhelmed with the amount of choices."

He wonders whether there is even a place for this kind of asymmetry in traditional

mainstream gaming. "There isn't really a mass-market, triple-A version of this game, because it can be contentious. There are so many layers of complexity in the multiplayer experience." Yet Turtle Rock's game was not an evolutionary dead end – Yanez himself points to another asymmetrical game as a model for success, taking *Evolve*'s one-versus-many approach in a decidedly more macabre direction.

**If you're looking** for an indicator of a game's success, getting a film adaptation greenlit by two of Hollywood's most acclaimed horror production companies isn't a bad one. That's exactly what James Wan's Atomic Monster and Get Out studio Blumhouse Productions are doing with *Dead By Daylight*. Released in 2016 by Canadian developer Behaviour Interactive and still going strong today, the game casts one player in the role of a killer and the other four as potential victims. It's the classic slasher-movie format, essentially, but viewed through the *Evolve* lens. The basic central theme has proved enduringly popular. "The power fantasy is very strong, especially when we went into the clichéd archetypes of old horror movies from the '70s and '80s," says **Mathieu Côté**, Behaviour head of partnerships and *Dead By Daylight* game director. ►

ABOVE Brandon Yanez was inspired by *Dota* when creating monsters in *Back 4 Blood*, ensuring that each fit an archetype: for example, Stingers act as a ranged class of sorts.

MAIN *Evolve* stands out as a big-budget asymmetric game. "When you start doing triple-A quality, you can't have sloppiness, because any sloppiness is your weakest link," according to Yanez



Mathieu Côté, game director, *Dead By Daylight*

**"THE POWER FANTASY IS VERY STRONG, ESPECIALLY WHEN WE WENT INTO THE ARCHETYPES OF OLD HORROR MOVIES"**

## DIVIDE AND CONQUER



### SWARMING UP

Back 4 Blood's Swarm mode started life as an asymmetrical version of the main campaign, in the tradition of the *Left 4 Dead* series, but Turtle Rock soon ran into problems. "Events are more complicated than *Left 4 Dead*, and there's more unique maps that wouldn't work with that framework," Yanez says, noting how player-controlled monsters could physically block certain doorways. Traversal was also an issue: in certain maps with large open areas, players controlling humans could literally outrun certain characters, while the Tallboy's camera went haywire inside some structures. "We had bigger creatures, more varied abilities, and so we were finding a lot of real big edge cases."



Jared Gerritzen, CCO and creative director, Illfonic

The game has only grown closer to its cinematic inspirations since launch. Today, *Dead By Daylight* has 27 DLC 'chapters', each introducing a mixture of new characters, items and maps to the game – many ripped straight from other horror series, from *Halloween* to *Scream*, *Stranger Things* to *Resident Evil*. While a steady flow of updates is an important factor in the longevity of any multiplayer game nowadays, Côté feels they're especially crucial for asymmetrical games. And, of course, especially difficult to balance.

*Dead By Daylight* now has dozens of survivors and killers, each with many individual perks, and changing any one of these can have a butterfly effect on the game's systems. "You have to sort of embrace the chaos – embrace the fact that this game is always going to be surprising, that people are going to be playing it in a way that you didn't expect," Côté says. "Adding a new killer [with] a new power that changes everything, adding new perks that will hopefully break the meta: shake things up, force people to re-learn a few things."

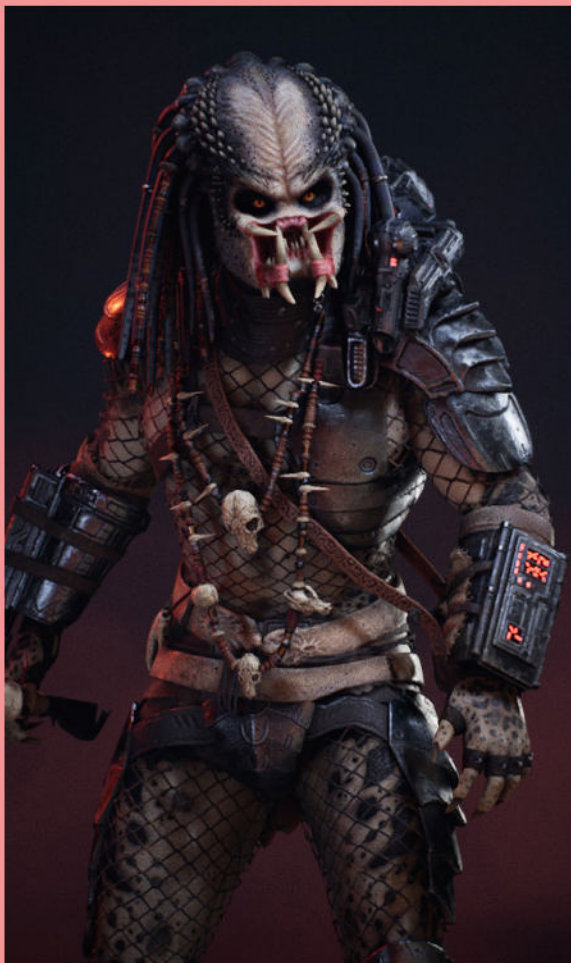
The success of *Dead By Daylight* paved the way for an asymmetrical horror boom, most picking up other film series, including *Killer Klowns From Outer Space* and *Evil Dead*. And if there's a poster child for this movement, it is

surely Illfonic, the Colorado-based developer which previously served as a support studio on *Evolve*. Since then, it has released three games in the mould: 2017's *Friday The 13th: The Game*, 2020's *Predator: Hunting Grounds*, and 2022's *Ghostbusters: Spirits Unleashed*.

Given the challenges presented by asymmetrical design, it's easy to see the appeal of adapting existing stories. Not only do they come with a baked-in audience, but they can also serve as a kind of design doc. "You think of a *Ghostbusters* game, it's like, 'Oh, ghosts versus *Ghostbusters*,'" Illfonic's Jared Gerritzen says. "They unintentionally made game mechanics that we ended up doing almost one-to-one."

Not that this makes Illfonic's work any easier: Gerritzen describes the process of building asymmetrical games as "making two games with two rulesets". But he believes that asymmetry keeps the studio's games fresh. Lead designer Jordan Mathewson started out as a YouTuber and has witnessed the evolving prominence of multiplayer games in the space, particularly asymmetrical examples. "The more you begin to differentiate the styles of each side, the more unique scenarios begin to unfold during each match," he says. "It makes it more entertaining, not only for those who are playing it, but for anyone that's watching."





**This one-versus-many** approach merely scratches the surface of what is possible with asymmetrical game design. Take for example *Natural Selection*, first released as a *Half-Life* mod in 2002. A wildly ambitious hybrid of FPS and RTS mechanics, it pits teams of space marines and aliens against each other, each with an entirely different control scheme and resource system. To complicate things further, the marine side includes a commander: one player with a top-down view in the vein of *Starcraft*. "At the time, it felt more like a dare," Unknown Worlds co-founder **Charlie Cleveland** remembers. "I was just so excited about combining things in such a crazy way. Like, 'Can we even make this work?'"

We know the answer to that now, of course. The original mod attracted player numbers rivalling those of fellow *Half-Life* mod *Team Fortress*, allowing Cleveland to found Unknown Worlds and start work on a full-blown sequel, one that gave alien players their own commander. However, *Natural Selection 2* wouldn't arrive until 2012, on the tenth anniversary of its predecessor. Cleveland describes the experience of building both a firstperson shooter and an RTS, all in a custom engine, as an "insane challenge" that led to "years of iteration, prototyping and testing".

He now realises that this was all but inevitable: "There's no easy way around it. There's so many different movement abilities and player classes – it's just really complicated."

Looking back now, Cleveland feels that *Natural Selection 2* is inelegant, each half compromised to make the other work. "We ended up making a decent shooter and a decent RTS, but I would never sign up to do that now," he says. "Whatever you make [in today's market] has to be outstanding in every way." Yet at its best, *Natural Selection 2* rises to become more than the sum of its parts, particularly in the game's competitive scene. "The heights it can achieve are incredible," Cleveland says. "It's a very specific feeling to have really diverse player roles that are all helping in their own way."

After launch, the game was supported with those all-important updates – but creating them proved a major challenge, due to the fragility of the game's interconnected systems, and development was handed over to a team of community members, some eventually coming to work in-house. With *Moonbreaker*, now in Early Access, Cleveland wants to channel his passion for asymmetrical games into a format that is "maintainable for the long-term". The game, modelled after Warhammer's tabletop ►

ABOVE Cleveland muses that a theoretical sequel to *Natural Selection 2* would use a class-based system rather than having varying control schemes. CENTRE For Jordan Mathewson, nailing the feel of monsters such as the Predator is crucial. "It's so enjoyable to try and recreate that." LEFT *Dead By Daylight* began life as a hide-and-seek horror prototype



Charlie Cleveland, CEO, Unknown Worlds

**"THE HEIGHTS IT CAN ACHIEVE ARE INCREDIBLE. IT'S A VERY SPECIFIC FEELING TO HAVE REALLY DIVERSE PLAYER ROLES THAT ARE ALL HELPING"**



## DIVIDE AND CONQUER



Boardgame designer  
Cole Wehrle

ABOVE The boardgame-influenced *Moonbreaker*. CENTRE In *Oath*, player decisions have serious consequences. "If they want to burn the world to ash," Cole Wehrle says, "game two is like: welcome to *Ashworld*." RIGHT Writing rulebooks is crucial for Wehrle, whose *Root* reached PCs in 2020. "If you're having trouble typing out a rule, it's pointing at its inelegance"

"ASYMMETRY  
CREATES  
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IT'S ALMOST  
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PUZZLES"

battles, leans into that second-order style of asymmetry, differentiating units through their abilities in the manner of a collectible card game: a steampunk-themed character that grapples units in a straight line, for example, or a ranged unit that debuffs enemies. "I just learned my lesson on [the *Natural Selection* series]," Cleveland says. "I want to be able to keep adding stuff and see the possibilities, but I want the game to actually function."

**On the other** side of this meeting point between digital and analogue games sits boardgame designer **Cole Wehrle**. Much like Cleveland back at the turn of millennium, he is mining *Starcraft* for inspiration – more specifically, its sequel. "[*Starcraft II*] is utterly shocking and brilliant," he says. "The asymmetry creates extremely novel situations – it's almost like a way of generating puzzles and challenges for the players. Because we have different sets of tools, I can't look at my opponent for an answer to a question – I need to find a novel solution."

Wehrle could just as easily be describing his own games here. Working with publisher Leder Games, his back catalogue includes the acclaimed boardgames *Oath* and *Root*, both of which incorporate varying degrees of

asymmetry. The former pits a single Chancellor against players trying to overthrow their rule, whether as Exiles or backstabbing Citizens. But the latter – which, appropriately enough given Wehrle's inspirations, is now a successful PC game in its own right – pushes this asymmetry to extremes. Players control warring animal factions with unique rulesets and playstyles – only cats have the ability to construct buildings, for example, while birds build their own rules, card by card, a flurry of actions which play out in pre-programmed sequences each turn.

As overwhelming as this may sound, Wehrle designed *Root* to be an accessible experience. The key to pulling off such a high-wire act comes back to core design principles: start with a solid framework, rather than focusing on making individual factions interesting. Wehrle spent a year and a half nailing down the basis of his forthcoming project, *Arcs*, a kind of tabletop 4X space empire builder with asymmetrical elements gradually introduced over the course of a multi-game campaign. "You have to be very careful that the foundation is the right size before you build a house," he says. "If I start working on the second storey and then I'm like, 'This foundation is the wrong shape', then I have to tear down everything that I just built."





With these essential systems in place, Wehrle aims to build games that function as ecosystems, where player actions – disparate as they might be – are deeply interconnected. This fundamentally changes the types of stories that get told in games, he says, using the example of trees in *Warcraft III*. For the Night Elf faction, trees represent everything from combat units to command structures, making another player's decision to chop them down feel personal. "Now what I'm doing has a deeper resonance, because it is cascading through other game systems," Wehrle notes. "That payoff is huge, and is oftentimes worth the cost of asking players to learn a bunch of rules and systems."

**Asymmetry doesn't have** to be an engine for conflict and competition, however. It can also be a way of bringing players together, as in Hazelight Studios' award-winning *It Takes Two*, whose two lead characters are frequently completing different sides of the same task, each with their own mechanics. One player might be given a throwable nail, aimed in the manner of a thirdperson shooter, while their companion is playing a simple platformer in which the nails become essential jumping-off points.

In co-operative puzzle games, asymmetry can become an engine for communication, since

each player has only half of the picture. There may be no better example of this than *Keep Talking And Nobody Explodes*, which pairs one player disarming procedurally generated bombs (inside a headset, in the game's VR versions) with a support team rifling through a thick manual and yelling out instructions, all while a timer ticks down. The game has inspired a wave of asymmetric co-op puzzlers, including 2021's *Operation: Tango*, as Clever Plays co-founder (and the game's director) **Mattieu Bégin** is happy to admit.

*Operation: Tango* presents as a blend of *Mission: Impossible* and *The Matrix*, with one Agent infiltrating high-tech corporations, relaying information to a Hacker partner in cyberspace. Although Hackers can occasionally wrest control of security cameras to guide their teammate through spaces, players must communicate verbally to solve puzzles, which often evoke the kind found in escape rooms. "It's not as much finding the solution that's the process, it's more about describing what steps to take," Bégin says.

Such is the extent of *Operation: Tango*'s asymmetry that it cannot be played splitscreen, instead requiring each player to have their own device. This made the game difficult to shop to publishers: some asked for splitscreen to be

## NETFLIX AND CHILL

Bégin believes there is huge potential in the casual gaming market for asymmetrical experiences, particularly on mobile. Currently, games such as *Operation: Tango* are limited in their discoverability to "traditional gamers" playing on platforms such as PC and console. "There's a lot of people that would be interested in videogames like *Tango* [but] they don't go to Steam or Xbox," he says. Bégin feels that boutique mobile gaming platforms such as Netflix Games offer a potential solution, by presenting new experiences to a wider audience.



Mattieu Bégin, game director, Clever Plays



## DIVIDE AND CONQUER



### WII U-LOGY

Committing so fully to building *Affordable Space Adventures* around the Wii U hardware with its touchscreen GamePad gave the game a literal expiry date, thanks to the recent closure of the console's eShop. Not that Nygren minds much, however. "We just knew from the start: it's a Wii U game. I didn't worry too much about what could have been, or if there were other alternatives," he says. "I've come to peace with the idea that games are temporary things. I'm not too worried – I'm just really happy for everyone who got to play the game."



Indie developer  
Nicklas 'Niffilas' Nygren

included, while one asked if Bégin could possibly create a bespoke AI for a singleplayer mode. "I'm not Google – I cannot create an AI that replicates communication," he laughs. However, a global pandemic proved the perfect environment for releasing an online-only cooperative game. "Tango is really, at its core, a very positive experience – it's just about having a good, positive time with your friends," Bégin says. "It brings people together when they're forced to be apart."

**Given that Clever** Plays is a studio of just eight people, developing an asymmetrical game might seem like a big ask. But it's certainly not the only small team to explore this space. *Keep Talking* was made by a core group of three, while our next game came about through a collaboration between NapNok Games, a small Swedish studio, and a single developer who happened to be working out of its Copenhagen office at the time: **Nicklas 'Niffilas' Nygren**.

NapNok had just completed work on *Spin The Bottle: Bumpie's Party*, a party game for Wii U, and it was Nintendo's hardware that helped Nygren realise an idea with *Affordable Space Adventures*. After reading about the infamous Capcom mecha simulator *Steel Battalion*, with its absolutely enormous Mega

Jockey 9000 controller, "I also wanted to make a game with a huge custom controller or sliders – knobs and stuff – but I realised I could never afford that," he says. "When the Wii U was announced, I realised I could [achieve the effect] with a touchscreen."

Nintendo's console was perfectly suited to asymmetrical multiplayer, its GamePad meaning designers had two separate screens, and control schemes, to play with. The possibilities were demonstrated at the device's launch in *Nintendo Land's* bite-sized party games, such as Luigi's Ghost Mansion, and in a *ZombiU* multiplayer mode that tasked one player with surviving an onslaught of zombies unleashed by an GamePad-wielding adversary. But as the hardware faltered, few developers really took up the mantle.

Released in 2015 – more than halfway into the console's lifecycle – *Affordable Space Adventures* is a rare exception. While the television screen shows your rickety spacecraft navigating a hostile planet, the GamePad acts as a sort of "heads-down display", used to manage ship systems in the manner of *FTL: Faster Than Light*. While the game was originally envisioned as a singleplayer-only experience, its creators soon realised that its various components could easily be delegated





among multiple players: one engineer working on the GamePad, with a pilot and navigator using Wii controllers to steer the ship and control the scanner respectively.

Nygren concludes with what has become a recurring theme of our conversations: "[Being asymmetric] definitely added development time. Even the things that may seem small, like the interface and logic for splitting the controllers up between the players, is actually a lot of work," he says. "But as I consider the game best with two players rather than one, I think it worked out in the game's [favour]."

**While you might** expect this extra strain to hit smaller developers the hardest, there's a belief that it could well be with these teams where hope lies for asymmetrical design. "Whenever you look at newer or more innovative things, it's usually smaller indies that do it," Bégin says. "More established entities try to take a bit less risk and stay within genres that can financially support their bigger teams."

When reflecting on the role asymmetry might play in any future Turtle Rock games, Yanez shares his fears that these games are "not mass-marketable" due to their complexity. And for all *Dead By Daylight*'s success, Gerritzen agrees that this factor can present a barrier to both

publishers and larger developers: "Right now, I feel like a lot of the asymmetrical games are still at that 'single-A' level." Still, he reckons, there's a lot of design space left to be explored, which could lead to "some pretty wild games".

At a time of increasing homogeneity in multiplayer game design – whether it's the battle-royale explosion or the orthodoxies of progression systems – this novelty is one reason to hope that asymmetry has a bright future ahead of it. There's also the social aspect, as played up in *Keep Talking* and its successors, and the opportunity to create the kinds of engaging player stories that can only be told from two very different sides.

For Cleveland, meanwhile, it all comes down to fulfilling player fantasies, whether by embodying the tunnelling hivemind of the Zerg in *Starcraft* or walking a mile in the lethal Predator's shoes: "Basically, to allow players to find an archetype that fits them and become that archetype, to live and breathe the game." He knows the cost of asymmetrical design better than almost anyone, after those long years making *Natural Selection 2* – yet his enthusiasm for such games remains undimmed. "I love those crazy combinations and I love exponential possibility space," he says. "It's what makes me want to build games." ■

ABOVE Just like Charlie Cleveland, *Operation: Tango* director Bégin is heavily inspired by asymmetric boardgames, particularly their emphasis on player communication. LEFT For Nygren, working with a team on *Affordable Space Adventures* was a learning experience, requiring him to get familiar with Unity

**"WHENEVER  
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The dark magic of Bloodborne lingers, even as FromSoftware moves on to pastures new

By **SIMON PARKIN**

Illustrations **Shimhaq**

**D**own by the old canal in Central Yharnam, past the shambling crows and the groaning, curfew-breaking villagers, there is a window that wriggles with candlelight. You can't enter; iron bars and taut chains hold back the city's tide of filth. But approach in good faith and you may talk to the girl who sits, unseen, on the warm side of the pane. She doesn't tell you her name (eventually you'll see it's kinder that way), but she does share with you her problem.

A while ago the girl's father sharpened his axe and, like you, set out to join The Hunt: a vigilante effort to rid Yharnam's streets of the infected souls that keep daughters locked indoors. When he did not return, the girl tells you, her mother left to find and fetch him. Neither parent has returned yet. So the girl waits, anxious and alone in the house, too afraid to stay, too afraid to leave, condemned to the unbearable purgatory of the abandoned child. Might you, she pleads, hunt for her lost parents?

You will know Viola, her mother, by her red brooch. You will know her father, period. Finally, through the window, the girl passes you a delicate music box, which tinkles a melancholic tune when cranked. With this device, she explains, her parents will know who sent you.

When, an hour or so later, you meet Father Gascoigne, you assume he is just like you. He wears the same sort of highwayman's hat, and a similar heavy leather trench coat. He wields the same kind of frightening weapons: an overengineered axe in the right hand which can, by some Yharnam mechanic's workshop tinkering, switch between short- and long-range forms, and a blunderbuss in the left.

But just as you move to greet him as an equal, he bounds toward you, hunched and tense, ready to fight, driven mad, you now assume, by whatever sickness has overtaken this forsaken city. This is a man no longer able to tell friend from foe — an affliction, you later learn, that affects most hunters, eventually, who are contaminated by that which they pursue. What choice do you have, but to betray the child who sent you?

Something of the man remains. Pull out his daughter's music box, and its tune will penetrate the fog of Gascoigne's madness. For a moment he stops his pursuit and writhes among the tilting gravestones, hands clutched to his head — trying, it seems, to expel the memory of the person he once was, and the people he once loved. It's a temporary cessation of hostilities. As the music box slows and stills, the rage returns. You must fight to the death.

When Gascoigne lies vanquished in a pool of his own treacherous blood, you light the blue lamp by the fountain and, if you're an inquisitive sort of person, follow the narrow path that leads to the upper part of

the area, where you may drop down onto a small rooftop. There you'll find the body of a mauled woman. She's clutching a red brooch. Gascoigne's last victim, it seems, was his first love. The girl who lives in the house by the canal is an orphan now. What will you tell her?

**While no** player who wishes to progress in *Bloodborne* can miss this vicious fight, it's easy for the inattentive, or uninterested, to miss the depth of the family's tragedy. This is the way the game's director, Hidetaka Miyazaki, and his team of visionary artists and designers at FromSoftware prefer to tell stories: a trail of crumbled clues, easily unobserved, which must be pieced together by attentive players, who refine their theories in online chat rooms in the months and years that follow the game's release.

Some things, however, are unmissable. At the beginning of the game, you arrive in this mysterious town, a sickly person drawn to Yharnam because of its reputation as a place of healing. You agree to receive the cure offered: a blood transfusion that the town's clergy-surgeons have been administering for years, seized by the belief that therein lies the cure to all ills.

Then, the man tending to you presents you with the bill: "Just go out and kill a few beasts". And at its most base and elemental, this is all the story that matters, perhaps — you are now employed as a hunter who must help cleanse a city gripped in plague lockdown of the monsters that roam its streets. But as ever with Miyazaki's games, this

brutal 'what' is underpinned by a complex tangle of 'why's which wait for anyone who wants to peer a little deeper into the mist that rests over the story, much like it rests over one of its cathedral doors, where the next terrible fight awaits.

**When it arrived**, in March 2015, *Bloodborne* was unexpected. Throughout the 1990s, FromSoftware was an obscure Japanese videogame studio best known for its *Armored Core* giant robot combat games. Then the studio hired a soft-faced computer engineer from the American software company Oracle. Hidetaka Miyazaki was almost 30 when he joined — an uncommon, vaguely shameful career move in Japan, especially considering it was reportedly accompanied by a major pay cut.

As an adult, Miyazaki had drifted away from the videogames he enjoyed as a child. Then he played Fumito Ueda's groundbreaking *Ico*, and felt drawn, once again, to the dance. He made his directorial debut with 2009's *Demon's Souls*, a dingy, knotted dark-fantasy game built on the forsaken foundations of a much older FromSoftware game, 1994's *King's Field*. ▶

### AS EVER WITH MIYAZAKI'S GAMES, THIS BRUTAL 'WHAT' IS UNDERPINNED BY A COMPLEX TANGLE OF 'WHY'S











*Demon's Souls* appeared, glancingly, to be the stuff of cliché: knights and dragons, treasure chests and fireballs. The game sold poorly at first, then through word of mouth gained a whispered reputation for being, behind the tired aesthetic, unusually inventive. *Dark Souls* followed, perfecting the heft and weight of combat, all wrapped in an idiosyncratic mode of storytelling, where clues were as likely to be found in item descriptions tucked in inventory menus as in stentorian theatrics. *Dark Souls* cemented Miyazaki's reputation as a visionary director of fantasy games set in turreted worlds of Arthurian nightmare. We felt we understood the man, and his work.

But then: *Bloodborne*. A game built not from Tolkien offcuts but blocks hewn from an entirely distinct set of traditions. Of plagues and pandemics. Of serrated tools wielded by medieval surgeons, and the erratic firearms of black-hatted highwaymen. Of slurping Cthulhu, and barrel-chested giant hogs, and of crows and rats and furred muscular backs arched against the full moon. Of poky cobblestone streets beneath the red moon, slicked with rain – or is that blood?

**Like *Dark Souls*,** *Bloodborne's* world is a nest of densely arranged alleyways linked by clever shortcuts, which snaps a little further into focus with each step. Also similar is the process of collecting currency from downed enemies to incrementally upgrade your attributes, which is lost on death but waits at your graveside to be reclaimed. And yes, here too you learn the rhythms of combat in a hostile world, when to lunge and when to feint, when a quiet street is clearly leading toward an encounter with some towering terror.

But *Bloodborne* is singular, too, a game without equal, or even equivalent – a liminal, dream-like portal to a distant, quasi-historical place where ordinary lives are ruled by seemingly well-meaning churchmen, and where freedoms are curtailed by diseases that exist beyond the stretch of scientific understanding. The game is set in some version of the real past when there was no distinction between the clergyman and the physician, when there were those who honourably performed their duties in these ancient roles, and those who used them only for personal gain, power or titillation. And it ►



## FEAR THE OLD BLOOD



This is an edited extract from Tune & Fairweather's *Blood Echoes*, an anthology of *Bloodborne* essays and interviews due for release later this year. It can be preordered now at [bit.ly/bloodechoesbook](http://bit.ly/bloodechoesbook)

is set, too, across the span of a single night, its world shifting as the blood moon wheels, leading up to a final choice: wake from the nightmare, or end it. (In this way *Bloodborne* is one of the few videogames that allows its player to entirely skip the final bosses, albeit for a price.)

The urgent oppressiveness is felt in the game design, too. Here there is no health-giving flask that replenishes each time you rest at a lantern; rather, each blood vial must be looted from slain foes or bought, exerting a continuous psychological and financial pressure on your progress. In contrast to Miyazaki's other games, which allow players to develop their character in ways to suit their playstyle, *Bloodborne* offers a much narrower spectrum of options. There are few shields behind which a cautious player can strafe and tremble; here you must learn to dodge and roll away at speed, or master the precise timings required to parry an incoming blow.

**When *Bloodborne* arrived**, the most recent global pandemic was the so-called Spanish Flu – a moniker laced with the same xenophobia with which the citizens of Yharnam regard outsiders. That pandemic, which arrived in the aftermath of the First World War, killed at least 50 million people, but it had happened almost a hundred years ago, situated temporally somewhere in the mist that hangs just beyond living memory. Today there is no one alive unfamiliar with what it means to be afraid of the air we breathe, of lonely lockdowns, of the sight of bodies being lined up on the streets, handled by professionals draped in protective clothing. Today, you might say, *Bloodborne* hits differently.

To visit Yharnam is to tour a place wrecked by disease. The streets are filled with caskets, which lean against each other, bound in chains that suggest the cadavers, like those claimed by the Black Death or of COVID-19, remain a threat to the living. The footpaths around the city are lined with gravestones, a canny environmental design that marks the boundaries of where you can roam, while suggesting that this is a city of the dead more than it is of the living. Lit windows signal a citizen inside, and as you chat to them outside the door, you feel their anxiety, frustration, or loneliness. The best part of a decade on from *Bloodborne*'s release, it is all so jarringly familiar.

A few years after *Bloodborne*, FromSoftware would explode *Dark Souls*' claustrophobic corridors into the great outdoors of *Elden Ring*, a game set across the grand sweep of a vast and verdant open world. In cartographic terms, *Elden Ring* felt like the logical expansion of an earlier template, one that could finally be realised thanks

to technological advances. To expand *Bloodborne*'s world in similar ways, however, would be a mistake; this is a game whose character is inextricable from those poky alleyways, cramped cemeteries, shadowy nooks behind the bins. It is intricate and vertical. *Bloodborne* is not an evolutionary stepping stone towards some full and future realisation; it is self-contained, definitive in a way that few videogames ever truly feel, its own conclusion.

Likewise, its tactile feel in the hands is fully formed, perfect. The urgent vitality of its fights remains. Vicar Amelia, boss of the cathedral ward, whom you fight by the light of a thousand candles under vaulted ceilings, screams like a cornered dog (as does, much later, Laurence, the First Vicar, whom you fight in a partly demolished version of the same cathedral, during the game's one, only and utterly essential expansion, *The Old Hunters*). She moves with canine lunges, her hair rendered as white ribbons fluttering in the breeze. There is something ancient and elemental to the encounter.

Each monster you meet feels like the incarnation of some deep fear. Rom, the Vacuous Spider (a name that implies a rival kind of spider, one that is profound, perhaps?). The barnacled Witch of Hemwick. Mergo's terrifying Wet Nurse. These are enemies that play on ancient anxieties: the oversized bug; the vicious grandmother figure; the adult who was supposed to nurture, but instead betrays.

There are few friends to be found in *Bloodborne*'s world. Occasionally you'll find a friendly nun, trembling in a basement, whom you can direct to one of the game's clinics, safe spaces for terrified refugees. Most of their stories, however, end in tragedy. There is no light relief here in the harried world of Yharnam (a city named after a queen who, herself, embodies this world's ur-tragedy, the loss of an unborn child), where even the quasi-comic figure of Patches – a character who cameos in most of Miyazaki's games – is grotesquely rendered as a two-faced spider.

All of which goes some way, perhaps, to explaining why *Bloodborne* has endured in a way that few videogames do. It feels just as taut and urgent as it did on arrival, its impact barely diminished by the inexorable technological progress that defines, for better and worse, the medium. This is a game equally inviting as it is repulsive. And as the circumstances of the world shifted around it, the game acquired a new significance, a new urgency. Now, as lockdowns have eased and we have, once again, returned to the streets, into the daylight, those months feel curiously dreamlike, and unreal. *Bloodborne*'s surreality is something every person, everywhere, understands now – deep in their bones, deep in their blood. ■

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# T H E M A K I N G O F . . .



## C A R D S H A R K

How Kubrick and magic tricks  
inspired a whole lot of cheating

By JON BAILES

Format PC, Switch  
Developer Nerial  
Publisher Devolver Digital  
Origin UK  
Release 2022



Misdirection is hardly an alien concept to games. We pay for the artifice, after all, knowing that the worlds we enter are built to immerse us in their scenarios and stakes, obscuring the machinic calculations that make them tick. *Card Shark*, though, holds misdirection unusually close to its heart. Its characters are impostors and liars, its visuals draw attention to their unreality, and its card tricks lay bare their component parts before your eyes. With that insight comes one of gaming's oldest and greatest superpowers: the ability to cheat.

It's no surprise to learn, then, that the concept for *Card Shark* was conjured after artist **Nicolai Troshinsky** took up card magic as a hobby. "In the process of learning," he explains, "I discovered some concepts related to card cheating, because magic and cheating are very interconnected." What pushed these discoveries forward into a vision for a game, though, was the cinematic magic of Stanley Kubrick – specifically the card-game scene in his historical drama *Barry Lyndon*, in which the hero cheats to victory. "I sparked this idea that you could have a game that's just this scene from *Barry Lyndon* over and over," Troshinsky says, "and because I was learning all these methods for doing tricks, I could see the potential for a variety of gameplay [situations]."

For a while, not much happened. Primarily an illustrator and maker of animated films, Troshinsky had made games before, but only on a "tiny" scale, and his plan for *Card Shark*'s journey through 18th-century France would have to be a much bigger undertaking to do the idea justice. "I remember I told a few friends and everybody was like, 'Oh, that would be great,'" he recalls. "But I thought of it just as a funny idea. I didn't expect to actually make it." It was about a year after conceiving the idea that he spoke to one friend in particular – Nerial's creative director, **Arnaud de Bock** – and it started to become a serious proposition. "He was immediately very excited," Troshinsky tells us.

There's a small irony here in that de Bock had originally got into game development thanks to Troshinsky. They first met when they both lived in Madrid, some 11 years ago,



Techniques such as **injogging** are slowed down and exaggerated, but all are genuine methods of cheating

through a mutual friend and a shared interest in fine art. "[Nicolai] introduced me to the American indie scene and weird games that were very obscure at the time in Spain," de Bock says. "It showed me that it was possible to make a living from videogames." De Bock

## "THAT WAS MY INTENTION FOR THE DESIGN. I WANTED TO TORTURE THE PLAYER A BIT, TO MAKE THEM SUFFER"

went on to create *Pikuniku* and work on Nerial's *Reigns* series, and confirms that he quickly saw the potential of this idea. "When [Nicolai] was telling me about it, I was already imagining myself sweating playing this game," he says. While part of the sense of reward in the game should come from cheating rich people, he thought, it also had to come from pulling off scams while working under high-stakes pressure. "That was my intention for the design," de Bock says. "I wanted to torture the player a bit, to make them suffer."

**Nerial thus teamed** up with Troshinsky to make *Card Shark* a reality, with Troshinsky also providing the game's art and animation. Even at this early stage, he had much of the game planned out. "After meeting with Arnaud at the end of 2018," he says, "I sent him a storyboard of how we would budget the

game, and that storyboard was pretty close to how the final game turned out." De Bock points out here that he was a little surprised by the format of the plan, which was very much a reflection of Troshinsky's animation background. "You don't really do that in videogames," he says of the storyboard. "We think most of the time about mechanics first. So the way we sequenced the game was very strange, but it worked in the end."

One aspect that wasn't fleshed out at this time, though, was the exact machinations of the plot. "I proposed a starting idea of how the story kicks in," Troshinsky says. "The storyboard showed the first interactions, like the tavern scene. What changed was the specifics of how it happened." The task of filling in the blanks and scripting the piece was taken on by Nerial's design director, **François Alliot**, and like Troshinsky he took cues from *Barry Lyndon*. The main thrust of the story was a "sort of neither black nor white ascension through social rank with a bit of cheating," Alliot says. "The idea that you stumble through life until you end up at the king's table was very inspired by *Barry Lyndon*." Beyond the film, however, the tradition of the picaresque 19th-century novel on which it was based also became the object of Alliot's affections. He mentions Guy de Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* as another example in which "young characters take on the world, but it's really a bit of a mess. We wanted this feeling like your character is not really in control."

At the same time, while all the card tricks had been storyboarded, they still had to be implemented in-game. The key for Troshinsky was that all the ruses and sleights of hand they included should be possible in real life, whether or not a genuine trickster would be foolish enough to try them. "Some of them are too impractical – a cheat would just do something simpler," he says. "But people would be surprised which ones are actually practical." Indeed, one of the more preposterous scenarios in the game, in which hero Eugene attends a game disguised as a lady, and uses his fan to send signals to his accomplice, is among the more plausible, Troshinsky muses. "It would be surprising if it hadn't been done." In this historical context, he says, "nobody's ►

## THE MAKING OF...

going to suspect a woman fanning herself, and dresses at the time didn't have pockets, so this was a practical thing a woman could do – or a man in a woman's dress."

The really difficult ones to pull off in reality would be some of the more technical tricks, centred on manipulating the cards themselves. So it's only appropriate that this was the case when it came to reproducing them in the game too. "It was very challenging to get the right feel," de Bock says. He wanted players to feel a certain frustration that required them to call on their memory – "something you don't do a lot now in videogames." He also drew on the dark art of QTEs in pressure situations, despite knowing that some players find them unpleasant. "Sometimes, when you're at the table, you need to react very fast, so how can you transcribe that?" Another issue was that in real life you would spend hours trying to learn a single trick, and in the game that process had to be condensed into minutes, often while introducing vocabulary and actions that rarely feature in games. "One person who did a great job on that is [narrative designer] Daisy Fernandez, who did all the onboarding," de Bock says. "She succeeded in putting some humour into it, and finding a formula to make it digestible."

**In order for** players to really appreciate the finer points of the tricks they have to perform, *Card Shark* also had to do something else that games rarely do: focus on characters' hands. Since playing cards is usually a very tactile activity, de Bock notes, the hands had to be really zoomed in to make players connect with the activity. But there was a lot of other visual trickery besides, Troshinsky continues, with the animation of the hands involving various layers of individual pieces. "There's this sandwich of parts that has to be put back together in the game to look like hands," he says, and a "big puzzle of different animations chaining to each other." Figuring out how to break each action down into movements of individual digits that have to respond to player input yet all still gel together was one of the sternest challenges the developers faced. "We have massive documents explaining to the programmers how things should be assembled," Troshinsky says.

Equally central to the tense mood is the movement of the camera, and the way it frames the action depending on the scenario, always

## Q&A

**Nicolai Troshinsky**  
Creator and artist

### How did you settle on the art style for *Card Shark*?

I never start from scratch completely, but I also don't believe in an artist style. I believe in a project style. So I looked for what would be both possible and suitable for the project. Because we had this reference of the 18th century, and how we see it from today through the paintings and engravings of the time, which are these intricate and colourful Baroque works, we wanted to evoke that. But I wanted to exaggerate it a bit and make it playful.

### How did you achieve that?

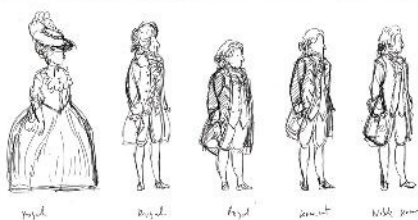
This style is a mix of modern illustration with exaggerated proportions – absurdly high ceilings, massive chandeliers, all that stuff. It's also very flat in a way that doesn't try to hide that it is flat and artificial. I was trying to have all that and at the same time make it look like a painting. Most of that is achieved through monoprinting, which is a traditional technique of stamping paint on a paper that gives you that rich texture and that feeling that it's all painted.

### What sort of challenges were involved in fitting this style into the game?

One of the big challenges is that *Card Shark* is a game where you sit at a table and don't walk much, so you don't really explore the world. All the locations have to be quite rich so they feel like a slice of something bigger, and you don't feel that you missed out. The fact that it's very colourful is also related to that – locations are varied in their colour schemes, so that throughout the game you exhaust the palette.

leaving the essentials of the scene highly visible. In some cases you may have a behind-the-shoulder view of your character looking at his hand, while in others you may be looking at the table from above as the cards are dealt. But rarely does the perspective remain static as cards are played and bets placed, which is also key to what might be called the Barry Lyndon experience. "When you're looking at the hands," Alliot adds, "and you're counting cards or in-jogging, it becomes very intricate whilst staying in the pacing of a movie, basically."

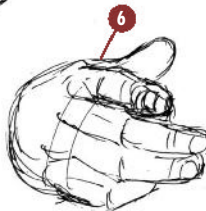
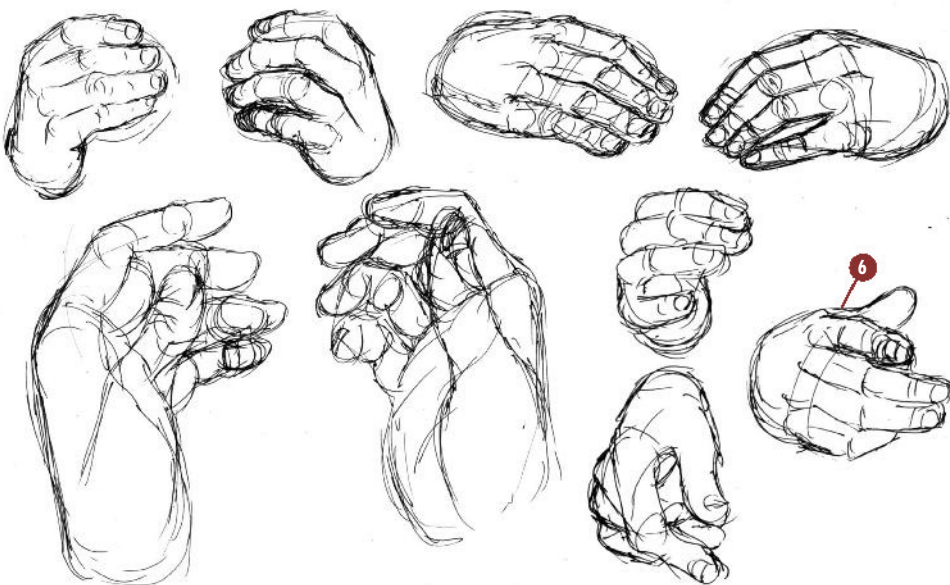
The card sequences had another purpose, too: to embellish the personalities of the figures of 18th-century French society who pop up ▶



- 1 In total, there were almost 2,000 individual sprites for the characters.
- 2 Some of Troshinsky's early physical sketches of the game's backgrounds and characters.
- 3 The cover art was a modular composition whose individual pieces could easily be rearranged to fit presentation in various formats.
- 4 Camera effects ensure the cards stand out among all the detail and colour present in the backgrounds.
- 5 At heart, the many characters were designed to resemble handmade cutout puppets.
- 6 Life sketches of card players' hand positions and joints clarified what would be required of the closeup animation sequences







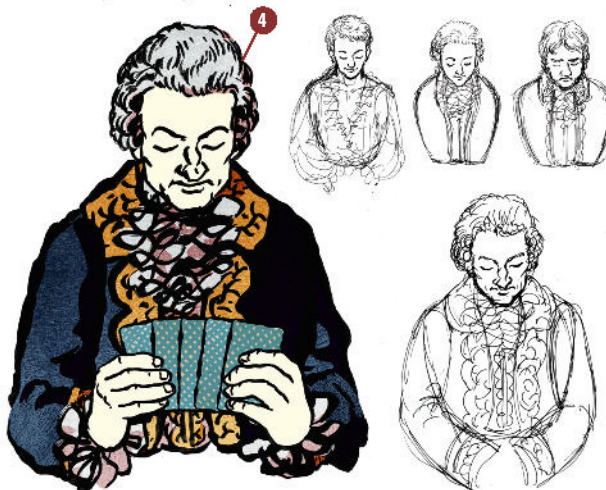
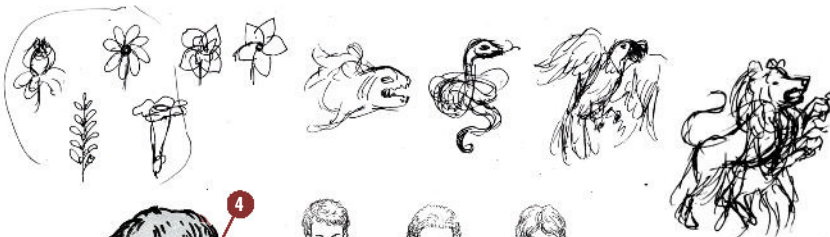
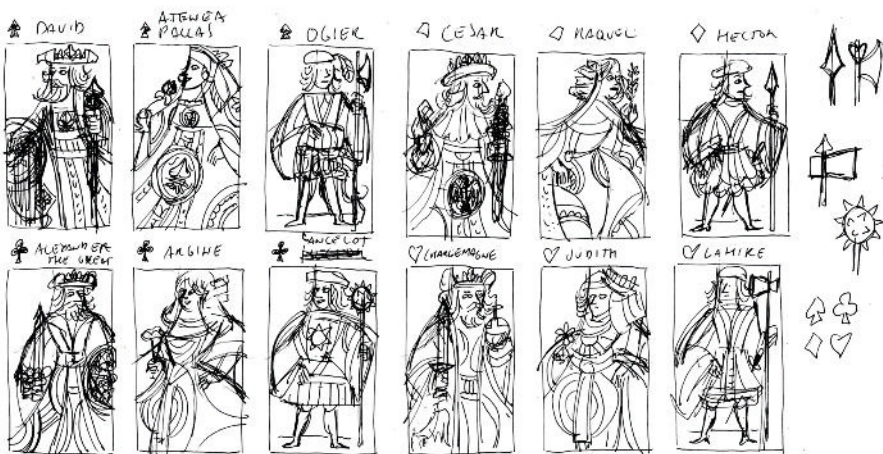
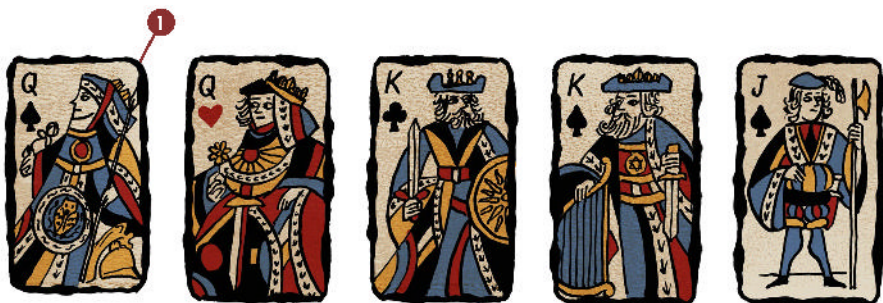


## THE MAKING OF...

throughout the plot (many of them plucked from real history) and provide each encounter with a different mood and tension. Alliot and Troshinsky matched the tricks to a range of archetypes – deciding which would work against a greedy player, say, or one who's also trying to cheat you – then allocated those archetypes to real characters and locations. Of course, in this story of liars and con merchants, historical accuracy was never on the menu. "It's a bit like [Alexandre] Dumas," Alliot says. "We make nice things with history." It's not like they had to invent outlandish backstories for the likes of Voltaire and Casanova, though, he adds – "they already have crazy stories." It was more a case of gathering them together in France around the same time, which most likely never happened. "Like, I'm not sure that Voltaire was in Toulouse for the big Jean Calas trial," Alliot concedes, "but he definitely wrote an essay about it."

**The player's guide** throughout is the Comte de Saint-Germain, Eugene's mentor and accomplice. The real Comte was an enigmatic figure, almost mythical, not least because many people pretended to be him, something that bled into *Card Shark's* incarnation. "Maybe even our character is only pretending to be the Comte, actually," Alliot says. Because his role is so fluid, in the game the Comte acts as a bridge between peasant life and high society, which helped in turning *Card Shark's* story into a cutting satire of a crumbling France in the years leading to the Revolution. What he reveals most of all, of course, is that everyone is a cheat, especially those at the top – if not in cards then by stacking the deck of society itself in their favour. "Exactly like in *Barry Lyndon* again," Alliot says. "There's no black and white. It's all grey. In the old France, there was no notion of meritocracy. It was all cheating."

Yet the satire only hits home because it still touches a nerve. "When we started discussing the project, we both liked that the theme of cheating relates to all these very juicy themes of loyalty, disloyalty, treachery, honour, greed," Troshinsky says. "These are big, universal themes." And with those themes, all the cheating really turns out to be a means of laying bare the most common misdirection of all. As Alliot concludes: "It's an interesting way to expose how our social ladder is all skewed, and doesn't really work." ■



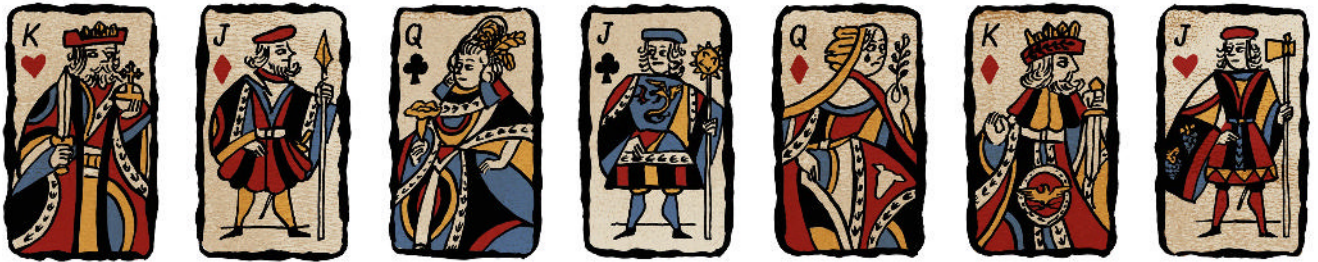
1 The cards follow the same visual style as the rest of the game, and obey Troshinsky's important rule of being "baroque but readable".

2 The irregularities and imprecisions of the monotyping technique were exactly what Troshinsky wanted, turning its application into a process of exploration and experimentation.

3 Locations began as rough sketches before a final engraving-like drawing was made. This sketch was then scanned and digitally coloured with placeholder textures so that the design intention could be tested in-game immediately.

4 There's a lot of trickery in the way characters are animated. Pieces of characters can even misalign at times and still look believable









**STUDIO PROFILE**

# LEAGUE OF GEEKS

How a cancelled project  
for Take-Two led the Armello  
dev to redouble its efforts

**BY ALEX SPENCER**





Founded 2011

Employees 65

Key staff Blake Mizzi (co-founder, director), Trent Kusters (co-founder, director), Ty Carey (co-founder, director)

URL [leagueofgeeks.com](http://leagueofgeeks.com)Selected softography *Armello*Current projects *Jumplight Odyssey*, *Solium Infernum*

There aren't many studios that, more than a decade after their founding, have only one game to their name. At least, not many you could consider a success. But when League Of Geeks' founders quit their jobs to chase a dream, a single project was all they really had in mind. "We never came together to build a studio – we came together to build a game," director and co-founder **Trent Kusters** tells us. "And we always knew that, once the game shipped, then we would go, 'All right, do we want to actually start a studio?'"

There was no guarantee, then, that they'd ever release a second game. And in the years since, there have been at least two moments when it truly looked like they might not. The most recent of those moments involves the cancellation of an "eight-figure" project with Take-Two's Private Division, but the first came much earlier – around the time of the studio's one (and, to date, only) game launch.

Kusters met fellow co-founders **Blake Mizzi** and Ty Carey while working at Australia's Torus Games – "at one point the most prolific independent developer in the world," Kusters says. If you've never heard of Torus, it's because the studio specialises in white-labelled games made "cheaply and quickly on every platform at once," Kusters says, sometimes "in a matter of weeks". Working on the internal pitching team, the trio would pull together proposals, "often late at night", with that same haste.

Having shipped, by Kusters' estimate, a combined 50 titles between them, they decided it was high time to make one of their own. This was in the early days of Apple's iPad, and many boardgames – something of which the trio have a shared love – were making the move from cardboard to silicon. They wanted to go a step further, developing a new game that played like a boardgame but was designed specifically for touchscreen controls. (Ironically, as development shifted to PC, the game wouldn't come to iPad until 2018, three years after its initial launch.)

Development of the game that would become *Armello* began "out of hours", until funds from a Kickstarter campaign allowed them to go full-time. "For a few months, anyway," Mizzi clarifies. "It was just enough to get us to Early Access." In turn, the money from a seven-month Early Access period – supplemented by the Indie Fund, an exclusivity deal with Sony, and "a slew of emergency loans from family members" – helped them survive through to the game's 1.0 launch in September 2015. This was, of course, the point



New staff at League Of Geeks are given the LOGbook, a kind of studio-culture manual modelled on Valve's handbook

at which they'd agreed to weigh up whether to proceed or step away. And we have to imagine the latter option was at least a *little* tempting.

"It was a bit of a miserable launch for us all," Mizzi says. "I think we were expecting, like, this space shuttle to blast off. And it was just a fizzle." Targeting day-one sales of around 10,000, in reality *Armello* sold a quarter of that. It wasn't quite a failure, but it didn't leave LOG with enough money to start working on a new game. "But," Mizzi remembers thinking, "it's making enough to sustain us right now." Kusters

## HAVING SHIPPED A COMBINED 50 TITLES BETWEEN THEM, THEY DECIDED IT WAS HIGH TIME TO MAKE ONE OF THEIR OWN

remembers looking around at the "kickarse" team they'd built, almost by accident. "We were like, 'Yeah, fuck it, let's keep going'."

**Not only would** they stick together as a studio, but they'd continue to work on *Armello*, essentially extending the Early Access approach beyond launch, with a major update every couple of months and paid DLC once or twice a year. In 2015, when the service-game model was still nascent, this was an unusual decision, especially for such a small indie. But it turned out to be the right one for *Armello*. A "crazy" number of players went on to buy the add-ons, Kusters says – "by 2018, the DLC was making more than the base game."

It couldn't last forever, though, and over time the updates became too costly for LOG to continue. "We sunk hundreds of thousands of dollars into this game, in the fifth, sixth, seventh years of support, that we never made back," Kusters says. "Being one of the first service games, there was no best practice on how to

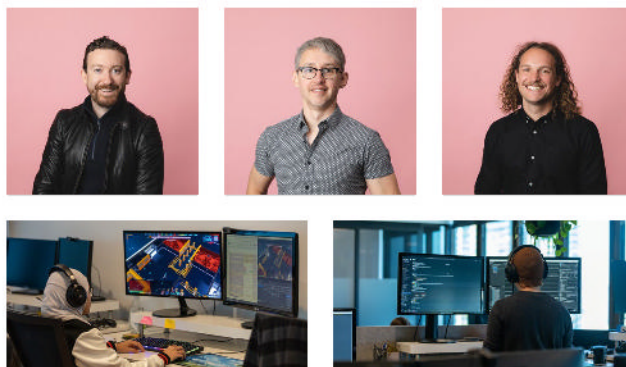
sunset a game. Because no one had done it yet, right? But there was this concept of 'dead game'." While *Armello* still had a faithful community, they were growing increasingly difficult to please. "We're really proud of where we've left it. But extracting ourselves from that project is one of the most painful processes we've been through."

Fortunately, *Armello* wasn't the only iron LOG had in the fire. In 2018, the directors had signed a deal with Private Division to publish a second title. While they're understandably reticent to share many details, Kusters lets slip that it had an '80s anime setting, "an eight-figure budget", and gives the basic pitch: "Taking XCOM and making it real-time, but for women aged 18 to 35."

This was a far cry from the title with which

LOG had made its name, and, as the impact of COVID bit (over 2020 and 2021, Melbourne was in lockdown for a combined 262 days), the founders realised that the studio might not be up to the challenge. "Our production director at the time, Lisy [Kane], ran the numbers and found we were working 40 per cent slower," Kusters says. "And the fucked thing about that is that no one on the team was working less. In fact, most of us were working *more*." They tried hiring, recruiting 20 more staff in the space of a year, but that didn't solve the problem – and just left them with more mouths to feed. Kusters credits Blake with the defining line of the moment: "We're ambitious. But we're not crazy." The project, they conceded, had now officially crossed that line. And so, in March 2021, the founders met with Private Division and agreed to cut their losses.

They remain confident that this was the right decision, but at the time it created a rather immediate problem. "We'd had money flowing in from America, every quarter, that was supporting the whole studio," Kusters says. ▶



TOP (FROM LEFT) Blake Mizzi, Ty Carey and Trent Kusters, co-founders and directors of *League Of Geeks*. Putting players in charge of a simulated crew with individual wants and needs, the studio heads confess there's a certain degree of autobiography to *Jumplight Odyssey*

"We had 50-plus people at that point in time, almost all of them working on that game, with just a skeleton crew on *Armello*." The founders gave themselves a single day of keeping the news to themselves, before calling an all-hands meeting the next morning to lay out for the team: "We've known about this for a while, we've got nine months of runway, we're going to go away for a week [and figure it out]."

The week in question was the annual founders' strategy retreat, a long-established annual tradition at LOG, but never before with quite this much riding on it. As the trio convened at an Airbnb townhouse in Melbourne, the first decision was reached quickly, Kusters says: "We didn't want to lose a single person." As for how they'd keep all of their newly expanded team employed? That took longer to work out.

There were a few possibilities on the table. The first was finding a new home for the cancelled game. "The IP is ours," Kusters explains. "It's not owned by Private Division or anything." The game was "super-close to finishing pre-production" when developer and publisher called time on it, and over the next eight weeks the bulk of team rounded off pre-production, "so that we could put it on the shelf, and can come back to it if we need." Another option (and from an external perspective, surely the most obvious) was making a sequel to the studio's debut. "We did discuss it at that point in time, but it was just too soon," Kusters says. "We weren't ready to go back to *Armello*. I don't think the team would have been behind going straight onto *Armello 2* – I mean, we still had some folks at that point who were keen to get off *Armello 1*."

Given they didn't set out with the intention of building a studio in the first place, did the three founders consider just calling it a day at this point? "Honestly, as responsible business owners, we had to discuss every option –

including shutting down the whole shop," Kusters says. "You know, what does that look like? We have all of these people – if we shut down now, we could pay them out for three months or six months or something."

**They eventually landed** on a different option – one that initially seems, to borrow Mizzi's line, not just ambitious but very possibly crazy too. They would split the studio right down the middle and begin work on not one but two new games, with identical budgets but in very different styles. The first was a leftover from 2017's retreat: an anime-infused spaceship colony sim they'd nicknamed *Loveboat Yamato*,

## HAVING TAKEN A DECADE TO RELEASE ITS SECOND GAME, ITS AMBITIONS LIE IN THE COMPLETE OPPOSITE DIRECTION

now retitled *Jumplight Odyssey*. The other was *Solium Infernum*, a remake of a lost strategy classic which was such a major influence on *Armello* that Casey had struck up a pen-pal relationship with its creator, Vic Davis, in the intervening years. "Ty came to that week away with basically his own little pitch deck for us, and we went, 'All right, let's ask Vic'." Kusters laughs as he remembers Casey's immediate reply: "Oh, I already have – he's into it."

They once again tapped the skills sharpened in those late-night pitch sessions at Torus, and pulled together a "package deal" proposal for Kowloon Nights. Within two months of the fateful meeting with Private Division, the funding had been approved. And so, with both games on synchronised schedules, later this year *League Of Geeks* will go from a

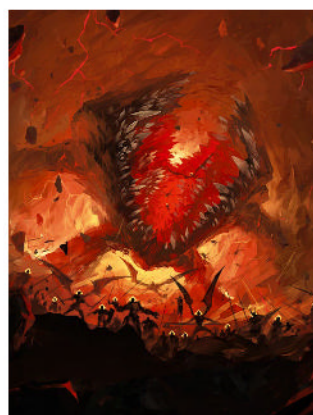
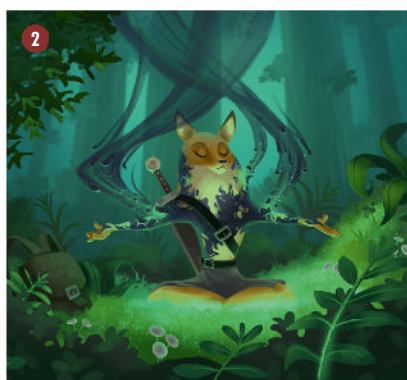
studio with just one release to its name to *three*, in a matter of weeks.

Those games will be supported beyond launch – though perhaps not for as long as *Armello*, Kusters being cautious about ending up back in the "quicksand". But the founders are looking further ahead still. "We already know what we want to make next, after these two games," Mizzi grins. Could this be that *Armello* sequel, possibly? Mizzi concedes that the studio's desire to make a followup is "the worst-kept secret". After years of updates, though, any sequel would have to go beyond graphical polish and a few new features. "The idea has always been to build these IP that we can rotate

games through, in different genres," Kusters says, pointing to *Warcraft's* evolution from strategy game to MMORPG. "We used to say – until the State of California started suing them for sexual harassment – that we wanted to be the Blizzard of Oz." And likewise, *Armello 2* might take the form of "an RPG, or an intimate warband RTS".

Only time will tell, but it's evident that, having taken a decade to release its second game, *League Of Geeks'* ambitions lie in the complete opposite direction. But they're informed by the history of the studio and its founders, right back to those early days "pumping out" games by the dozen, Mizzi says. "I think we've all got that sense of that ticking clock – almost, you know, 'We're on borrowed time – we've only got so many games left in us'. So we don't just want to make a sequel for the sake of it." ■

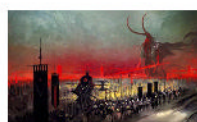
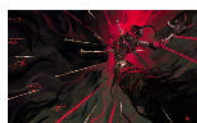
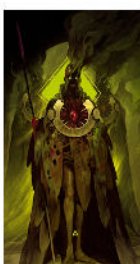




**1** *Jumplight Odyssey's* visual style sticks close to the cancelled *Private Division* project, taking influence from '70s rather than '80s anime.

**2** *Armello's* success has been in its long tail, with players returning to it whenever the mood takes them.

**3** As a remake, *Solium Infernum* was considered a relatively easy win for the team, although much of the game is being reworked



# PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

## STILL PLAYING/ NEAR MISSES

**Melon Journey: Bittersweet Memories** Switch  
'Travel to Hog Town, where melons are illegal' is one of the most memorably surreal promo lines of recent times, and but for a glut of life-stealing titles this issue we might have had the chance to discover whether this 'story-exploration game' could live up to it.

Certainly its early stages are engaging: though, as the genre descriptor suggests, it's light on mechanics, we're quickly won over by its viridescent presentation (it essentially resembles an emulated Game Boy game) and amusing interactions. Investigating the whereabouts of missing colleague Cantaloupe, we've already fallen in with a gang of local thieves and outed a hamster popstar as a lip-syncing fraud by unplugging his mixing board. What's next? We're already looking forward to finding out.

**The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild** Switch  
For vital research purposes, obviously, we return to a game that feels almost as Safflina-fresh six years on as it did at launch. This Hyrule definitely seems a little quieter and more peaceful – not empty exactly, but offering a little more breathing space than you get in its successor. Though it's perhaps testament to the many qualities of *Tears Of The Kingdom* that we find ourselves pining for Link's new toys (what do you mean, Magnesis can only pick up *metal* things? How very 2017), while gazing out from a hilltop feels positively quaint when we've spent many an hour of late peering down at Hyrule from above the clouds.

### Moonleap PC

This compact puzzle-platformer from Brazilian dev Gustavo Barros reminds us a little of the wonderful *ElechHead*. It's not quite as good, but its finely tuned level design makes the most of its simple conceit.

Your goal is to collect all the flowers within each single-screen stage, though each time your crescent-shaped avatar jumps, the level transforms from day to night or vice versa, causing spikes to appear or retract from platforms. Like the on/off platforms in several *Super Mario* games, it's counterintuitive to take off when your landing spot looks hazardous. If rewiring your brain doesn't take long, Barros gradually turns the screw – though you're never mad at the game so much as yourself for failing to keep up with its deceptively straightforward demands.



Explore the iPad  
edition of Edge for  
extra Play content

## REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

- 98 The Legend Of Zelda: Tears Of The Kingdom**  
Switch
- 102 Redfall**  
PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 106 Star Wars Jedi: Survivor**  
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 110 Humanity**  
PC, PS4, PS5, PSVR, PSVR2
- 112 Planet Of Lana**  
PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 114 Darkest Dungeon II**  
PC
- 116 The Last Case Of Benedict Fox**  
PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 118 Minecraft Legends**  
PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 120 Horizon: Forbidden West – Burning Shores**  
PS5
- 121 Mr Sun's Hatbox**  
PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
- 122 Tron: Identity**  
PC, Switch



# First among sequels

From a developer's point of view, follow-ups can be a particularly precarious balancing act. There's a pre-existing fanbase to consider, but you also want to attract new players. As such, you need to try to provide something that feels fresh, but doesn't paint over what people liked about the first game. Change too much and you risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Too little and players might as well just replay the original again. 'More of the same' is a misleading term: the elements that drew punters in the first time are unlikely to have a similar impact the second time around.

From our point of view, analysing a known quantity is in some respects easier; scoring them, though, is a thorny business. If we only rewarded novelty and innovation then few sequels, however refined, could ever hope to match or best their forerunners, even when providing a demonstrably better play experience. All the same, you can't deny the thrill of the new, while you want to make sure readers spend a chunk of the one life they'll ever have on a game that offers something meaningfully distinct (even if some really *do* just want the same thing but slightly bigger and shinier).

Happily, the successors covered in this issue make our job a little easier. *Star Wars Jedi: Survivor* builds smartly upon the flawed original, leaving Cal Cestis with the powers he had at the end of *Fallen Order*, so it can expand his moveset to make traversal and combat more exciting. *Darkest Dungeon II* offers vital flickers of hope in its gloomy world, compelling you to return even when all else seems lost. Last, and by no means least, there's *Tears Of The Kingdom*, providing a wealth of thrilling new toys that exponentially expand the possibility space in a world that has itself been extended, and not in the customary fashion. But sorry, Nintendo – unlike Nigel Tufnel's amps, **Edge** scores don't go to 11.



# The Legend Of Zelda: Tears Of The Kingdom

With great power, evidently, comes great irresponsibility. Shortly following an episode we'll call The Cartwheeling Raft Incident — not forgetting that poor Korok, seeking only to be reunited with a friend, last seen gliding toward the horizon glued to a contraption we abandoned mid-flight after the balloon fell off — we find our latest wonky dirigible trapped behind a waterfall.

Rather than leave *this* one behind, we embark upon a foolhardy retrieval mission. The river bank is just within swimmable distance, but not quite within reach of Link's new Ultrahand ability. No matter. The next five minutes sees us rummaging through our inventory; first, we try a long spear, pushing it close so the pointy end can glom onto it. That's not enough, so we Fuse two sticks and a claymore, extending this makeshift pole to finally pull our catch from its watery prison. The feeling of triumph is quickly undermined, however, as a thought strikes us: couldn't we have just used Recall to rewind the vehicle's trajectory and avoid getting stuck in the first place?

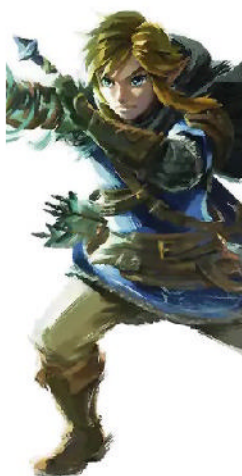
The common approach to sequels is to go large: in an industry that generally considers bigger synonymous with better, the results are often worlds that boast significantly more real estate than their forebears. *Tears Of The Kingdom* adopts and subverts that idea. Rather than expanding Hyrule's land boundaries, Nintendo extends it vertically: between the floating islands above and the subterranean cavities below, the total explorable space here is almost as tall and deep as it is wide. But if this generously broadens *Zelda's* sandbox, it has opened up Link's toolbox to an even greater degree: between his Zonai powers and the myriad ways the technology of this ancient race can be used and combined, the potential is overwhelming. Allied to the increased density of this new-old Hyrule — which is subtly transformed at ground level, too, offering a greater number of distractions and ways to resolve them — attempting to wrap your head around the possibilities is enough to make you dizzy.

But it wouldn't be a Nintendo game without a few nudges in the right direction. After a short pre-title sequence that provides revelations about Hyrule's history, and a shocking moment of iconoclasm (as well as a playful tease of a full complement of hearts before all but three are wrenched from Link, along with his right arm and prior abilities), you're revived and released into an airborne archipelago that functions similarly to *Breath Of The Wild's* opening plateau, a relatively serene place to learn the ropes, and obtain four new powers.

Of these, Ultrahand is both the most flexible and unwieldy, letting you grab nearby objects, reorient them and stick them onto others; at first it feels like you're also using an unfamiliar limb to grapple with them, but it soon becomes second nature, even if when working with multiple pieces it's easy for the binding goop to adhere to the wrong one. (The process of separating them, which

**Developer** Nintendo EPD  
**Publisher** Nintendo  
**Format** Switch  
**Release** Out now

We Fuse two sticks and a claymore, extending this makeshift pole to finally pull our catch from its watery prison



entails wagging the right stick to shake the held object free, is oddly pleasurable in itself.) Fuse lets you attach an item to an equipped weapon to enhance it, extending to arrows and your shield. With Ascend you can pass upward through solid matter and emerge where it ends. And the aforementioned Recall lets you freeze time to reverse the recent movements of an individual object.

Test cases for all of these are laid out simply before you. You might stick a Zonai fan on a minecart to push it along an upwardly sloping rail; when the next rail is broken on one side, your eye will naturally be drawn to a large hook on the ground nearby. You'll find loose pieces and sometimes even pre-assembled vehicles positioned slightly incongruously around areas where they might come in handy. At times you might wonder if another adventurer, from a different time, has left them for you — a certain story development suggests that could well be the case — or even cast them aside, having figured out a better solution. And abundantly spread across Hyrule, stands erected by a local construction company offer a selection of simple materials (enough, certainly, to build a basic horse-drawn wagon).

The shrines, however, prove to be the most effective teachers. For Fuse, we're shown the value of attaching a boulder to a sword to make a club that can smash through rocky obstructions; with Ascend we cut the ropes to lower a platform so we can pass through it.

These self-contained puzzles effectively offer a crash course in creative engineering, providing practical insights into making efficient — or just plain eccentric — use of the technology at your disposal, encouraging you to try them out in the world beyond. It's hard not to see the analogue to game development, not least given you have the leeway to jury-rig crackpot solutions should the intended method fail in some way (happily, vital pieces will reset to their default position if they become irretrievable). Sometimes it feels like we're being given a peek behind the curtain; a giant rotating orb in the sky feels magical on approach, but when we land inside it we see it's just a whirring fan on a wooden wheel. Any sufficiently advanced technology, and so on.

If Nintendo is happy to reward the player's invention, it's equally keen to punish overconfidence. In that regard, it appears to have learned a lesson from FromSoft: just as *Sekiro's* resurrection mechanic gave it the freedom to make an even harder game, Link's versatile new abilities demand tougher opponents against which to wield them. Indeed, in a world that features moments of Ghibli-esque whimsy, there is more than a touch of the other Miyazaki here. It's partly in the new menagerie: the returning Gibdos are imposingly tall and unsettlingly spindly in their design, yielding only to elemental attacks. And this incarnation of Gleeok (last seen in *Phantom Hourglass*) is comfortably its most





**ABOVE** Why yes, that is a piece of solidified lava we're using as a makeshift boat. You soon acclimatise to the idea that pretty much everything that isn't nailed down can be used, just as any held materials can be thrown



**TOP** The soundtrack might even top *Wild's*: Ganondorf's driving, percussive theme captures the character's brutality, while you'll find playful trombone and saxophone flourishes elsewhere.

**MAIN** This sand cloud blankets Gerudo and prevents your map from working, forcing you to glide between whirling updraughts to peek over the top of the maelstrom and pick out nearby landmarks so that you can reorient yourself.

**RIGHT** Batteries can keep Zonai tech powered for longer, but they'll detach when they're out of juice. Zonai ore can be refined into crystallised charges to power a new energy cell, but it takes time – another incentive to return to the sky, and a reminder that limits are a vital part of the core design

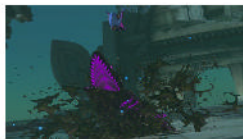




terrifying – and terrifyingly deadly – form yet. Creepier still are Horriblins, scuttling along the ceilings of caves, chattering and leaping or jabbing suddenly with spears. The corrupting gloom from beneath the risen Hyrule Castle, meanwhile, spawns pools of grasping hands that chase Link with distressing speed and persistence. That bleakness seeps into the story, too, which in places seems pointedly timely: this cataclysm is referred to as The Great Upheaval, while the corruption afflicting Link is purged via healing crystals, which, in what feels like a wry nod to an outlandish suggestion for treating a coronavirus infection, produce a tremendous light.

Darkness takes root beneath the surface, too, with chasms into which you can plunge to explore Hyrule's underground. If those who complained about the absence of conventional dungeons in *Wild* may not be entirely mollified by the four elemental temples here (see 'The Blooper Temple Clause'), these dingy spaces are designed with challenge in mind. Reliant on Brightblooms and their seeds (struck with weapons or fused with arrows respectively) to illuminate the murk, we realise to our horror that some of the campfires we've been following may not be campfires after all. Worse still, the gloom-afflicted enemies down here deal damage that can't be recovered with a simple meal; instead, you must locate and activate Lightroot plants. It represents still another change of pace: progress is made in tentative steps, and you'll likely be startled at just how little you've seen when you're ready to emerge. Part of us wonders, though, if Nintendo could have gone further: perhaps fast travel is too easy an escape from the catacombs' fearful grip.

Above ground, however, Hyrule feels more alive than ever. It's not simply the increased bustle of its settlements (particularly Goron City) but the sheer range



#### THE BLOOPER TEMPLE CLAUSE

You're joined once more by partner characters whose abilities factor into the main dungeons' puzzles and thereafter bolster Link's repertoire. This time they appear alongside you as ethereal figures you must approach to ready their power before actively choosing to unleash it before it times out, lending an extra injection of chaos to an already unruly combat system. The dungeons are perhaps closer in form to the Divine Beasts than the labyrinths of old, but they're more visually distinct, with each offering a twist of some sort: you largely pick your way around one temple from the outside, while another has you taking on its guardian *before* you enter, and a third plays host to a mischievous muck-spreader – alongside *Splatoon 3*, the second unlikely *Mario Sunshine* homage of recent times.

If some combinations seem overpowered, there's usually a catch: a Gibdo Bone's mighty attack boost only lasts for one hit, for instance, while fusing a fire emitter to your shield degrades it quicker. Its flame, too, is short-lived

and volume of organic discoveries and the more frequent systemic collisions. Within half an hour, we watch agog as a Moblin and several Bokoblins fight with a group of Zonai robots; the clamour attracts a new flying enemy, the Aerocuda, which swoops down to join in. The grand spirit of adventure remains, but *Kingdom* exposes the series' true soul: from encounters to traversal, everything feels like a puzzle. Yet it's hard to think of any other puzzle game that affords such room – in every sense – for this degree of spontaneity and experimentation.

There are, of course, limits to all this: from Link's stamina gauge to the much-debated weapon degradation and the energy cells that power the Zonai devices, those restrictions lend purposeful tension (or slapstick comedy) to your riskier stratagems. More concerningly, the hardware itself sometimes buckles under the weight of the imagination of its designers and players: in 60+ hours we witness some of the most intrusive technical issues we've seen in a firstparty Switch game, from brief freezes to alarming framerate drops. And if one of its greatest accomplishments is to somehow make us a fan of crafting, once too often it falls into the same trap as many lesser games, simply adding a cumbersome extra step to what would ordinarily be a fairly straightforward process. But these rare lows are a fair trade for some of the most stratospheric highs we've experienced in a videogame since, well, its predecessor. In reimagining Hyrule and reshuffling the tools you'll use to explore and to save it, Nintendo may not have *quite* reinvented the wheel. But this kingdom provides a wondrous space in which to consider how you just might.



## Post Script

Up in the sky: how Kingdom's floating archipelago allows Zelda to soar to new heights

From above, Hyrule looks calm – or perhaps it's just that this place feels so peaceful. The wind seldom gets above a whisper, the sparse score a calming accompaniment to the gentle chime of a bell marking the start and end of each workday for the automata that serve as stewards for the Temple Of Time and the islands surrounding it. It's beautiful up here, too, with sumptuous skyboxes that are a comfortable match for anything on more powerful hardware. Little wonder, then, that we quickly realise we're in less of a rush to get back to ground level than we ever anticipated.

We do, however, find a quite delightful way of getting there. As we explore, we discover a mysterious object: a thick piece of slate adorned in decorative markings, with two others nearby. At first, we try to glue them together: do they perhaps form a circle? Not quite. It's only when we detach them, accidentally dropping one into a set of grooves on the ground, that we identify its avian design, wingtips curving up aerodynamically. It begins to move, sliding forwards toward the island's edge. We run after it, hurriedly hopping aboard what we later identify as a Zonai Wing; instead of falling, it catches the air, its trajectory shifting as we carefully adjust our position atop it.

The slow descent that follows is blissfully serene. And when it's finally time to touch Hylian grass, the sky's call is tough to resist. It's not simply that the Great Upheaval has left the land in disarray, or that it's a particularly unpleasant place to be – the threat below may be greater, accompanied by climate shifts that show the pandemic is not the only real-world concern occupying the thoughts of Nintendo's writers, but that makes you only more keen to put things right. In large part, the appeal is down to the ways it belatedly fulfils the promise of not one *Zelda* game but three.

**Skyward Sword** is the most obvious antecedent, a game that also attempted to reckon with the region's past while letting players soar through its skies as well as explore the land beneath. With hindsight, perhaps hindered a touch by the tech (another commonality), it slightly fudged any meaningful connection between the two. Sure, there were fleeting skydiving sections as you plunged from Skyloft or leapt from your Loftwing, but they felt like different worlds, linked only by being in the same game. Two console generations later, it's still hard not to marvel that they occupy the same space, and that your location above has a bearing on where you can land. There's something special, too, about seeing the spot from where you dropped – such that you feel like excitedly grabbing the nearest local to tell them.

The reverse is also true. Fast travel can return you from whence you plummeted, but why would you

bother when there are several better ways to get back up there? If *Breath Of The Wild's* Sheikah towers presented an engaging test of stamina management, *Kingdom's* sky towers offer a different challenge. Here, you don't have to worry too much about your upward trajectory, since the mechanised tentacles of a repurposed Guardian strap you in and hand you a rope, before a burst of air shoots you skyward.

From here, Link can scan the land below, filling in his map and highlighting any nearby islets in the sky, which in turn encourages you not to simply dive straight back down. The sense of discovery here is reminiscent of *Wind Waker*, as you plot a path to an undiscovered landmass, not knowing what you'll find. But while that game's seas were enjoyable to traverse, there was little challenge or thought to it once you'd tamed the wind. The allure of the air is similar, but requires more attention – and it's here that stamina management comes back into play. You must deploy your glider carefully, while making use of an ally's ability to help you along. Young Rito companion Tulin comes with a Gust power that can knock enemies over in battle, but up here this strong tailwind fills Link's sailcloth, pushing him farther.

Even then there's a natural sense of peril, since fully depleting your stamina effectively means death; it's more thrilling than ever to approach the edge of a platform and mantle up it with a sliver left (though a prepared player should have stamina-boosting meals to scarf down mid-glide). The alternative is to assemble a vehicle of some sort, either via found Zonai devices or obtained from capsule machines. Getting parts is a good excuse to seek out more fights against robotic opponents, not least since it brings you into contact with one of the game's best new recurring bosses.

Nintendo itself described *Breath Of The Wild* as an 'open-air adventure', but *Kingdom* feels like a superior expression of that ideal. That game was all about scaling hills, scouting out potential destinations and dropping a pin to highlight them before gliding down to begin your journey, and its successor takes that concept to its logical extreme. It says much that only at high altitude can you get a clear view of a series of geoglyphs, allowing you to pinpoint the eponymous tears: these crucial items fill in events leading up to where the story begins, each cinematic rewarding your diligence in locating the droplet within these intricate patterns. Surprisingly, it's in a sand-shrouded Gerudo that the game's defining philosophy is outlined, via an optional conversation. "The key to making new discoveries is being able to get somewhere high up," says treasure hunter Calisa. "So get high up and look around – you're bound to discover all kinds of things!" ■

In large part, the appeal is down to the ways it belatedly fulfils the promise of not one *Zelda* game but three



# Redfall

**E**arly on in your mission to drive the vampire occupiers from the New England town of Redfall, you're approached by the local doctor. He presents you with a pocket watch that once belonged to his mother, and asks you to leave it on his father's grave. A thematically vivid setup, certainly – but for an activity that, in the event, proves to consist entirely of walking up to a trigger point, pressing a single button, then schlepping back to base. At which point he hands you another mission of the exact same variety, and then another. These are not side quests, we should stress, but mandatory steps along the critical path. As Arkane missions go, it's not exactly *A Crack In The Slab*.

It's indicative of the kind of minor disappointments we keep bumping up against in *Redfall*'s opening hours. No player could fail to notice the emptiness of its open-world map, nor the plethora of bugs which persist through to the game's launch. Yet more painful, perhaps, are those disappointments likely to be felt most keenly by devotees of the church of Arkane Studios. The kind of player who will take their first opportunity to sneak up on a guard and, rather than a brisk stealth takedown, unleash an awkward elbow nudge that only causes their target to turn and point a shotgun in their face. Who, on picking up a bottle of bleach or a gas mask, might find their mind suddenly alight with possibilities of how these could factor into the simulation – before realising they're just a stand-in, immediately turning into a currency used primarily to buy more ammunition. Those who treasure moments of chaotic emergence in combat will find the old saw of grenades rolling down hills made difficult by a world that nails all of its environmental threats to the floor, effectively useless against any foe too stubborn and selfish to wait patiently in their blast radius.

It's not hard to imagine why these decisions might have been made. Those nailed-down explosives, for example, are presumably due to the practicalities of syncing physics simulations between four distant machines. As we play, we find ourselves thinking a lot about the journey that led from whatever *Redfall*'s original design document looked like to here, and the string of compromises made along the way in order for a studio of this size to even make such a game. Because, lest we forget, this is a deeply ambitious undertaking: an open-world multiplayer shooter that mixes the infinite looting and boisterous cooperation seen in the likes of *Borderlands* or *The Division* with the peculiar, delicate magic of Arkane's previous work. But these concepts, it seems, are not especially compatible.

Gunplay is perfectly robust and punchy, whether you're sniping cultists from a far rooftop or sliding into action with a pneumatic stake launcher. It's a particular thrill against vampires, who don't just take more damage than their mortal counterparts but require special tools

**Developer** Arkane Studios  
**Publisher** Bethesda Softworks  
**Format** PC, Xbox Series (tested)  
**Release** Out now

**Best of all is the UV beam, which slowly causes vamps to petrify, freezing them in place as a grasping statue**

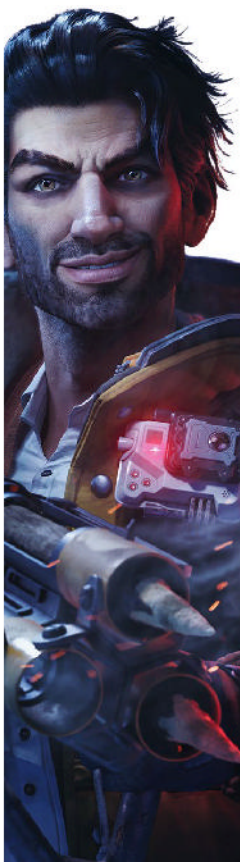
to eradicate for good. Bullets will bring them to their knees, eventually; for a mortal wound, though, you'll need to drive a stake through their chest, or apply a little fire. This means you'll want to pack for the occasion, dedicating at least one of your three weapon slots to vampire-hunting kit. There's a stake launcher, a hulking thing that, because it isn't combustion-based, is actually your most consistent option for silent attacks, *Redfall*'s equivalent of the crossbow. There are burning flare guns, too, but best of all is the UV beam, which slowly causes vamps to petrify, freezing them in place as a grasping statue that can be caused to crumble with a single tap.

This deployment of vampires proves an elegant solution to the demands of the game's twin lineages. It finds ludonarrative justification and opportunity for multiple approaches within a genre in fealty to numbers that must always go up, where one bullet can do an order of magnitude more damage than another from an apparently identical gun with a lesser stat profile. Alas, it might be the game's only elegant solution to these demands. These are ultimately the reason, we suspect, why there are no knife-in-the-back takedowns, even against the rank and file, and why a point-blank headshot isn't a guaranteed instant kill.

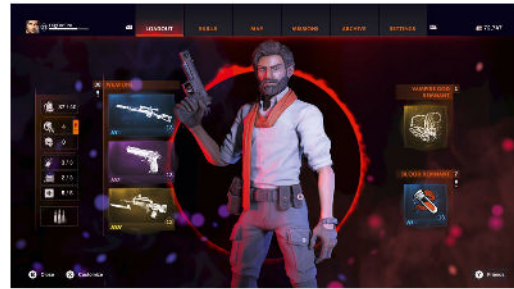
**All of which** is a hard sell when the trade-off turns out to be a rather unsatisfying weapon churn. Comparing stats and clearing out your inventory is a chore, and with such differentiators between each weapon, our reaction to collecting a new gun quickly goes from excited to exhausted. There's something in the clumsy execution, so out of sync with current best practices for a game like this, that suggests the people making *Redfall* don't much enjoy this style of game themselves – a sense that's only underlined by how multiplayer is implemented.

While having other players by your side is where *Redfall*'s limited magic shines brightest, actually getting a group together is about as nightmarish as having your hometown taken over by the undead. The fact that games are bucketed into solo or multiplayer causes all sorts of practical issues with players joining or departing sessions, while the way it handles progression is unfathomable. While everyone keeps their collected weapons and experience from co-op games, completed missions are persistent only for the host player. This makes organising matches an extended negotiation over who gets to advance, leaving us to spend half our time treading back over old missions.

To get the most out of multiplayer, then, all parties will need to commit to a single save file, and to only playing together, since the game does very little to account for characters of different levels. Nonetheless, if you *are* going to play *Redfall*, we'd encourage you to make the effort. Each of the four available characters comes with three unique powers: generally one for combat and







**ABOVE** Skill trees can be used to reduce cooldown and add extra effects to abilities, or else simply improve other stats in some way. If you wanted to be punched in the face, you could say you're buffing the vampire slayers



**TOP** When playing cooperatively you're not bound to other players' locations, and free to wander. In practice this is discouraged, both by voice lines and by the swift death that can follow.  
**MAIN** Nests aren't just loot depositories: bringing one down will also remove its presence from the map, which makes the undead in its vicinity significantly weaker.  
**RIGHT** The Hollow Man runs Redfall Commons, the game's opening area. Long before your face-off with him, he's a constant Shodan-like presence, speaking out of any working radios and TVs







one for traversal, plus an ultimate. Compared to Corvo or Colt, however, these powersets are perhaps a touch thin – until you start mixing them together.

An immediate favourite is Devinder's Translocator, lobbed like a grenade and opening a teleport gate wherever it lands. This might sound like yet another spin on *Dishonored*'s Blink, but note that it is a thrown object, with a slow arc, that can bounce off surfaces and fall short of your intended target, leaving the teleported Dev treading thin air.

Vital for its appeal in multiplayer, meanwhile, is that these gates are two-way and open to all friendlies. At its simplest, then, it's a handy way of closing the gap between players after being separated. But we soon learn to combo with Layla's trampoline-like Telekinetic Elevator to fling the Transponder farther and higher. Alternatively, the exit gate can be placed inside the Elevator, so that you teleport and are immediately flung upwards. It's a joy that never quite gets old – and the same could be said of watching another player use these abilities from a distance. Remi using her C4 to rocket-jump onto a rooftop guarded by a Watcher, a fragile but observant vampire. The telltale purple flicker of Layla's powers, her silhouette briefly glimpsed against the sky, then the red fire of a successful dusting.

There's magic elsewhere too, if you're willing to look for it. What initially seems like a world devoid of life gradually begins to open up and layer in much-needed systems that fill the gap. Vampire Nests that culminate in a hectic smash and grab as the level collapses around you, challenging you to balance looting and seeking the exit. The Rook, a potent consequence to your actions as each success contributes to a meter that, once full, turns the sky red, with lightning strikes that shake entire



#### LOSING THE PLOT

*Redfall*'s most memorable stories are delivered in the traditional Arkane manner: voice notes and text logs, which spin off-chilling tales of the regular townspeople, and how easily many of them turn to evil. In multiplayer, though, it can be hard to pay attention. Recordings are triggered by each player individually, leaving you to hush one another to hear them, while taking time to read has the guilt of holding up your teammates. The rather more generic A-plot – concerning members of the Aevum Corporation, who turned themselves into vampire gods and unleashed this fate on the town – does at least find an interesting multiplayer-friendly means of delivery in the 'Echoes', flashbacks embodied in the level as *Tacoma*-style outlines. As players form a circle, trying not to block one another's view of the action, it's strangely reminiscent of an immersive theatre show.

*Redfall* is at its most visually striking when the vampire-inhabited psychic realm intrudes upon the real world and reshuffles its architecture into impossible shapes – or simply blows it apart

buildings, before summoning a musclebound vampire enforcer. Once you access the game's second map, vampire factions are introduced, as happy to scrap with one another as the player – we have great fun setting off car alarms to summon enemies of differing allegiances. But *Redfall* keeps these cards close to its chest for too long. Even the fact that a second area exists is withheld for a dozen hours or so, by which point you may well have grown tired of what the game is offering. The payoff, when it does come, can often still be muddled.

Let's return to that pocket-watch mission. The watch isn't just of personal import – it's also a health-boosting trinket likely to be more powerful than others you've encountered at that point. On depositing it at the grave, you're offered a classic immersive-sim choice: would you like to pocket it for yourself? We resist, and on the second mission are sent out to collect our reward, a shotgun we later use to blow the doctor's father to smithereens when he rises from the grave and drains his son of life. We find the watch in the ashy remains.

Yet, forced to revisit the same missions on a multiplayer save, this time we give in to temptation and snatch the watch right from the start. We brace for new consequences, yet everything plays out exactly the same way, aside from perhaps a little extra guilt at the doctor's death. There's something here: a glimmer of promise, the kind of idea that surely shone bright in the game's original conception. But the realities of development have resulted in a game that, like a misjudged Translocator leading only to a dead drop, falls well short of the imagined outcome.



## Post Script

### All under one roof

Shigeru Miyamoto exploring the forests and caves of his hometown, a childhood landscape that would later form the contours of Hyrule; Hidetaka Miyazaki at the school library, poring over fantasy books in a language he couldn't fully read; Pokémon creator Satoshi Tajiri's youthful enthusiasm for catching insects, so feverish that he was nicknamed 'Dr Bug'. It's easy to see why these origin stories have passed into videogame myth, seeming to present a key to the work and minds of some of our most important developers, a rare concrete answer to the age-old question of where they get their ideas from. *Redfall* co-director Harvey Smith has one of these origin stories too, but it's rather less wholesome.

As a teenager, Smith and two friends broke into an abandoned house in Texas. They picked through the lives of its former occupants, now long gone, and thrilled at the knowledge they could be caught at any moment. As detailed in E383, Smith is open about the formative impact of this event, and its effect on his understanding of game design. He sees it as the essential basis of a videogame design philosophy that eschews the 'rollercoaster' approach in two major ways.

First, there's the tension of being somewhere you shouldn't, whether according to the rules of the game world or even its developers. But just as important is that space presenting the player with the scattered elements of a story, and leaving them to piece it together. This is the basis of some of the immersive sim genre's finest level and narrative designs. Many of them even take the form of actual, literal houses.

Often these are rather bigger than the homes we're used to in real life. You can follow the tradition of mansions and manors from the *Thief* games through a good share of *Hitman*'s levels and what must be its apotheosis in *Dishonored 2*'s two most famous residences. The extra room afforded by such homes are surely one of the reasons that the rich elite are such common targets in such games, aside from the simple cathartic pleasures of stealing their stuff.

There are examples, though, that stick to a more familiar scale, such as *SWAT 4*'s Fairfax Residence, the suburban home of a serial killer. Strip out the action component, meanwhile, and you get *Gone Home*, which manages to make the player character's own family home feel threatening as you work out what has happened in your absence. It's almost a surprise, then, that it has taken Smith so long to move out to the suburbs himself.

*Redfall* covers a variety of territory, but a good chunk of its map consists of those wide roads lined with evenly spaced houses. And OK, given their built-in garages and sizeable backyards, for many of

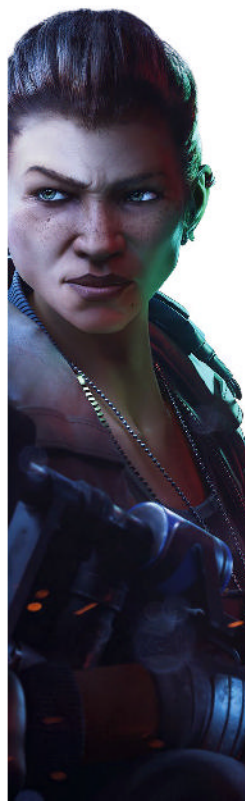
residents of the UK even this is an unimaginable property footprint – but it would be considerably harder to get decent level design out of a single-storey flat. Trying our hand at a spot of forced entry, we hit one of *Redfall*'s first limitations: the fact that most of these houses are shells that cannot be entered. And here we thought it was just vampires who needed an invite to come inside.

**On reflection, though,** this is a perfectly sensible compromise. There are dozens of homes in *Redfall*'s open world, and filling them all with interesting sights would be a Herculean task. The real problem is that we're not entirely convinced that the game manages to fill even the few interiors it does allow you to explore. These tend to appear on the map as named points of interest: the Reyes House, the Creelman Residence, the Smith Orchard House. Stepping inside, a process that might require lockpicks, a hop to the roof, or the disconnection of a burglar alarm before smashing a window, these houses certainly deliver on the tension side of the equation. The lights are invariably out, so you move from room to room, sweeping with the beam of your flashlight, never quite sure when it is going to fall on a pack of vampires sleeping out the day.

The houses, though, fare less well regarding the other half of Smith's rubric. It's not that they don't have stories to tell, exactly. In a trailer park, we find the home of a schoolteacher who has been sacrificing their most annoying pupils to a vampire out in the woods. In a house converted into a TV repair shop, we discover that the owner built the cultists' ramshackle broadcast shrines, and his tragic motivation for doing so. In what must be a nod to the aforementioned Fairfax Residence, we're drawn into the basement of a serial killer, thrilled to be continuing his work as a vampire.

But with layouts that authentically replicate the interchangeable McHouse architecture of the suburbs, these locations aren't able to tell stories with their shape the way that, say, a *BioShock* level might. That puts a lot of pressure on the props scattered around the place for environmental storytelling. Too often, all the information is dumped into a single note, perhaps with a couple of items or bodies to bear out what it tells us. It's a nice detail that the teacher's trailer has a window overlooking the spot where he leaves his victims, a pair of binoculars balanced on the sill, but that turns out to be the full-stop on this very short story. Harvey Smith clearly knows what it is that makes a house, real or virtual, stick in the memory – we just wish that *Redfall* had been the kind of game that allowed him to demonstrate it. ■

In a trailer park, we find the home of a teacher who has been sacrificing annoying pupils to a vampire



# Star Wars Jedi: Survivor

When considering what makes a good sequel – and, just as pertinently, what absolutely does not – there might be no richer case study than Star Wars. So it's only natural that, in crafting its follow-up to *Fallen Order*, Respawn would look to a few of the series' better examples. In classic second-act fashion, there are flashes of real darkness and loss in *Survivor*'s story, with a few beats borrowed almost wholesale from *The Empire Strikes Back*. But perhaps the finest tradition it picks up is allowing a little time to pass – enough for characters to grow, and their situations to develop, in a way that suggests a life outside the snippets we get to see on screen.

As we pick up with Cal Kestis, he's evolved from the character we left at the end of the last game. And not just because he's now able to grow facial hair – though that does help break the uncanny likeness to Riverdale's Archie Andrews. Kestis is now an experienced thwarper of the Empire's plans with a bunch of offscreen adventures under his belt and a newfound confidence to match, a touch of Poe Dameron wisecracking injected into the personality he displayed in *Fallen Order*, which was rather like that of wet cardboard.

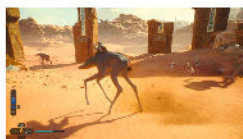
In the game's prologue we find Kestis and BD-1 on an adventure that, in another structural nab from Lucas, is unrelated to the main thrust of the plot. He still cuts about the galaxy in the Stinger Mantis, but its former crew are nowhere to be seen; in their place are a new line-up of rebel allies. The absence of New Yorker space-troll Greez Dritus, at least, is sorely felt. But this development's real contributions to the plot are a driving mystery (why they split up) and a tried-and-tested emotional spine (getting the band back together).

Both are very much needed. The contents of the game's exposition dumps are already fading from memory – something about a secret ancient planet hidden inside a space anomaly? Its primary villains are equally forgettable: one an alien barbarian lord in power armour, the other a Sith lord who, with his long hair and tight leather trousers, looks like he should be performing in a Eurovision-friendly metal act. Yet between these lulls there are moments of sharp characterisation, the odd joke that manages to prompt a honk of laughter, and a couple of spectacular set-pieces and reveals sure to enjoy a much longer mental shelf life. All told, it's a better piece of storytelling than Abrams' most recent big-screen effort.

**Of course, this** is not only a Star Wars sequel; it's also a videogame sequel, which comes with a different set of pressures to expand and advance. *Survivor* conforms to these traditions as tightly as it does the Star Wars ones, and Respawn has taken care to scrub away *Fallen Order*'s most grievous design blemishes. The game is considerably more handsome than its

**Developer** Respawn Entertainment  
**Publisher** Electronic Arts  
**Format** PC, PS5 (tested), Xbox Series  
**Release** Out now

Respawn has taken care to scrub away *Fallen Order*'s most grievous design blemishes



## FINAL FRONTIER

It's always pleasing to see *Breath Of The Wild*'s influence at work, and on Koboh it's evident both in the Shrine-style puzzle chambers waiting to be discovered across the map and in the two mounts used to expedite your journeys between them. The Nekko, a bipedal creature that resembles a Yoshi-chocobo hybrid but can be stabled and summoned at the push of a button, is the local horse equivalent. The flying Relter, meanwhile, is effectively just that game's glider with a bush baby's face attached. Both are more limited in design than their *Zelda* counterparts, but Koboh's fauna truly shines in the game's AI-vs-AI fights, which can break out at any time. Nothing helps sell the idea of a living world quite like the sound of distant blaster fire, yelling, and then silence.

predecessor, certainly in the condition it arrived on the previous generation of consoles. Most of all, though, *Survivor* is simply a *bigger* game.

Thankfully, we mean this less in terms of its length – if you can resist the wealth of side quests, the game can be wrapped up in around the same time as its predecessor – than what it does with that time. In one of the game's finest decisions, Kestis begins *Survivor* with the same moveset he possessed as *Fallen Order*'s credits rolled, and it quickly grows from there. In combat this primarily means the introduction of lightsaber stances, formalising the first game's unlockable double-ended and split-saber options into a system where each comes complete with its own moveset and skill tree. And then it adds another two: a Kylo Ren-esque crossguard style functions like a broadsword, while a combination of lightsaber and blaster allows you to interrupt enemy melee attacks with a well-timed shot, equal parts *Bloodborne* and *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. Meanwhile, in expanding the game's traversal systems Respawn seems to have looked to everything from *Celeste* to the *Ori* games for inspiration. Discovering these additions is its own pleasure, but the first is a grappling hook, and everything that follows is similarly geared to enable longer and more spectacular strings of Force-parkour.

It's the game's exploration layer, though, which enjoys the biggest overhaul. *Fallen Order*'s ambitions to a FromSoft-style Metroidvania structure never quite cohered, with the aforementioned map only exacerbating the problem of tangled level design with a surfeit of thankless backtracking. These problems are immediately solved here, in the latter case through the simple introduction of fast travel between the game's bonfire equivalents. And this is a necessary addition since, while the game still bounces between planets, one of them is considerably larger than the rest.

The dusty plains, mountains and bandit encampments that stretch outward from Koboh's frontier-town hub can be explored freely. It's a step towards open-world design rather than a full commitment – think *Arkham City* versus *Knight* – but this rather suits the game's Metroidvania stylings, and most of the pleasures that come with wider horizons are still present and correct (see 'Final frontier').

Koboh is a perfect example of *Jedi Survivor*'s almost conservative approach to sequelcraft. An expansion that pushes out in every direction, but is careful to leave the boundaries close to what was there before. *Fallen Order* was always a perfect candidate for this treatment, as a flawed first effort, and in the years since that game's release it's clearly not just Kestis who has grown more confident in his abilities. *Survivor* manages to leave us wondering what could possibly be left for a sequel – and surprisingly eager to find out.



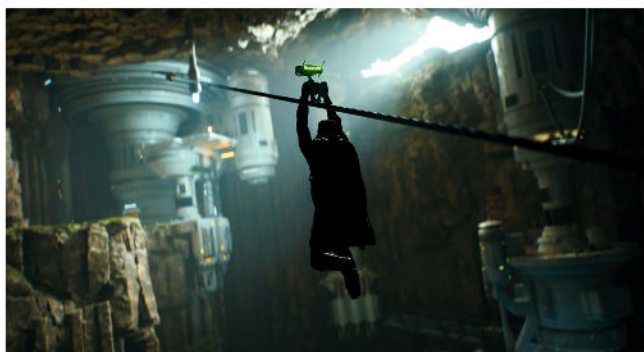


**ABOVE** Star Wars has always picked the bones of human stories – and on *Koboh Survivor* is unmistakably a Western. It's a natural fit for the game's more visible RPG leanings  
**LEFT** It's not just Cal Kestis who has adopted a new 'do: a few familiar faces return with visual design tweaks to reflect how they've changed since *Fallen Order*

**BELOW** Kestis immediately feels more nimble, but platforming sections occasionally push at the limits of his abilities



**ABOVE** The expanded moveset provides more ways of getting out of a tight corner, for which you'll often be thankful, since fights remain a challenge





As with its predecessor, *Survivor* offers a comprehensive photo mode. It's worth playing with in order to fully appreciate the sequel's more accomplished visuals

## Post Script

### On starting from the top

**Y**ou know how this usually goes. Samus Aran, patron saint of the genre, has spent an entire game becoming master of all she surveys. Her next adventure, though, begins with an unfortunate incident (a crashed ship, a parasite-removing surgery, a simple case of 'physical amnesia') that causes her to drop all the items that would have been so useful while exploring a new planet. Ah, well, time to collect them all over again – Morph Ball first, is it? How surprising.

To strip Cal Kestis of his abilities in such a way, though, would break the fantasy of being a Jedi: those lifelong students whose powers continue to grow well into old age, and the perfect embodiment of progression-based videogame design. It would also work against this series' efforts to form an ongoing saga, and its commitment to the idea of time passing between instalments. While the occasional mention of some unseen scrap with the Empire hints at the character's life when you're not controlling him, it's the way Kestis moves that really sells it.

You begin *Jedi Survivor* absurdly well equipped, able to double jump, fling your lightsaber, and push and pull Stormtroopers around with the Force – all abilities that came relatively late in the previous game. It's a brilliant decision, not just narratively but

mechanically. *Fallen Order*'s combat only really came into focus once you had access to all its tools, and some of the navigation abilities gained along the way felt like artificial gating: did we really need to learn how to hold onto a zipline? This feels like starting on New Game Plus – like cheating, almost – which is enough of a thrill to carry the game through its early hours, when the tutorialising drags. And then it starts piling on the new stuff.

It's telling that *Fallen Order*'s Force Slow ability has here been reinvented as an Ultimate, unleashed by depressing both thumbsticks, leaving room for a more interesting ability to take its former place on the right shoulder button. Multiple abilities, in fact, since the shoulder now acts as a kind of shift key. It can be combined with other inputs to hit an enemy with Jedi mind tricks, turning them to your side of the fight, or else send them into the air with telekinesis and slamming down again with a crunch. In the sections where you're accompanied by an AI ally, it can also be used to direct their own super attack. And all of these abilities (at least, the ones that issue from Kestis himself) can be upgraded, along with his pre-existing moves and the new lightsaber stances.

The game is noticeably more generous with its skill points than *Fallen Order* was, but

with nine skill trees to choose from, some prioritisation is still required. Which is no bad thing, since in it we find an opportunity for roleplay. Our Cal Kestis isn't some refined warrior monk but the kind of scoundrel who's not afraid to shoot first – something that can be reflected through *Survivor*'s much-expanded cosmetic customisation options. For the majority of our game, he's dressed as a pulp hero in a flight suit that shows off his holster, or else a roguish dandy with a natty Lando-style cape and a beard that suggests a thorough grooming regimen.

That your Kestis might well look and play very differently leaves us wondering, again, about the next adventure. Keeping hold of such a wide set of abilities once is a remarkable trick; to do it twice, when there's so much room for customisation, begins to look like folly. Throughout *Survivor* there's a theme of Kestis being coaxed into retirement, of hanging up his saber for good, and we can't help but read this in part as Respawn reckoning with the task before it. On a purely character-focused level, it's a perfectly reasonable desire, wanting to find a life beyond being a weapon – but we'll admit we struggle to invest in it emotionally, when *Survivor* crafts Kestis into such a beautifully satisfying Swiss Army knife. ■



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# Humanity

**A**mong *Humanity*'s many assets, the Goldy might just be its secret weapon. These statuesque figures resemble sentient Academy Awards and function like *Super Mario* stars: you needn't necessarily go out of your way to collect them all, but unlocking each chapter's ultimate challenge requires you to have gathered a certain number. And in Tha's spellbinding puzzler they quickly become an obsession, transforming the way you play. Ostensibly cast as a benevolent god, you're tasked with guiding crowds of mindless humans to a light marking the exit from a stage, taking control of a luminous shiba inu that drops commands in their path, each turn and jump order issued with a bark. But bringing these gilded automata with you often demands you lead the humans into harm's way. You might neglect groups that are marching toward the edge of a stage, or even deliberately direct them off it to make the crowds more manageable or to ensure no stragglers get in your way. And yet we find ourselves racing to the rescue of each Goldy we spy striding blithely toward their doom. Truly, history's greatest monsters have nothing on us.

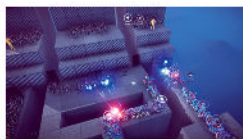
Not really, of course: you're told early on that humans respawn when they fall. A Goldy, however, does not, and thus you grow more protective of them. The notion that we might value these aureate collectibles more than their human counterparts is one of several cheekily provocative ideas in a game which grants you the great, terrible power to lead humanity either toward a kind of enlightenment (upon reaching the exit square, they take flight, as if ascending to the heavens) or to their apparent end. Indeed, as they pour through the entrances in their thousands, advancing in formation as sports fans or concertgoers might pass through turnstiles into a stadium, it's only natural that you no longer see them as individuals, but as a swarming mass that you have to find a way to bring under your control. The numbers, in other words, become so large that they're too abstract to properly comprehend – and, tragically, we have all seen real-world examples of that.

Which isn't to say that *Humanity* is especially highfalutin; nor, despite the austerity of its stages, is it a bleak experience. But these thoughts spill out as you play, much like these agents of chaos, which defy the usual strictures of the puzzle genre. Though they advance in tight formation, their behaviours determined by the commands they pass through, the process of completing a stage can often feel messy. It's partly a result of your active presence in this world – the dog's own limitations mean you lack the omniscience (and omnipotence) your deific perspective would suggest, with some stages requiring you to move with the pack by using your power to temporarily inhabit a single human.

Meanwhile, the level design often leaves you needing to be in several places at once, denying easy solutions. When introduced, the 'branch' command immediately

**Developer** Tha Ltd  
**Publisher** Enhance  
**Format** PC (tested), PS4, PS5 (tested), PSVR, PSVR2  
**Release** Out now

**It is hard to recall another game that actively changes genre partway through, and not only once**



## MASS APPEAL

Those you've guided into the light populate a pristine white space that functions as a chapter-select menu, like many hub areas of recent times. We lose many happy minutes sending our canine avatar scampering through the swelling crowds, displacing them to the degree that our path through them can be traced from above. Moving between the chapters sees the humans swooping and crawling as they form different shapes and patterns, which only provides more incentive to try out the skins and models, unlocked as your Goldy collection increases. So if the watching humans 'perish' appals, you can always change them into cartoon robots, metallic monoliths or neon spheres. Or maybe just give them hats or big heads.

provokes a mild sensation of fear, since you know that means you're going to split the pack, probably more than once. To add to the plate-spinning tension, your charges are numerous enough to occasionally cause them to stray from the path you've laid out: place a group into a holding pattern while busying yourself elsewhere and they might be nudged beyond the influence of a placed instruction. When pushing a heavy block down a narrow path, for example, you might encounter a group heading in another direction, forcing you to quickly lead them elsewhere – and, yes, you soon learn that a collective forced plunge is usually the safest bet.

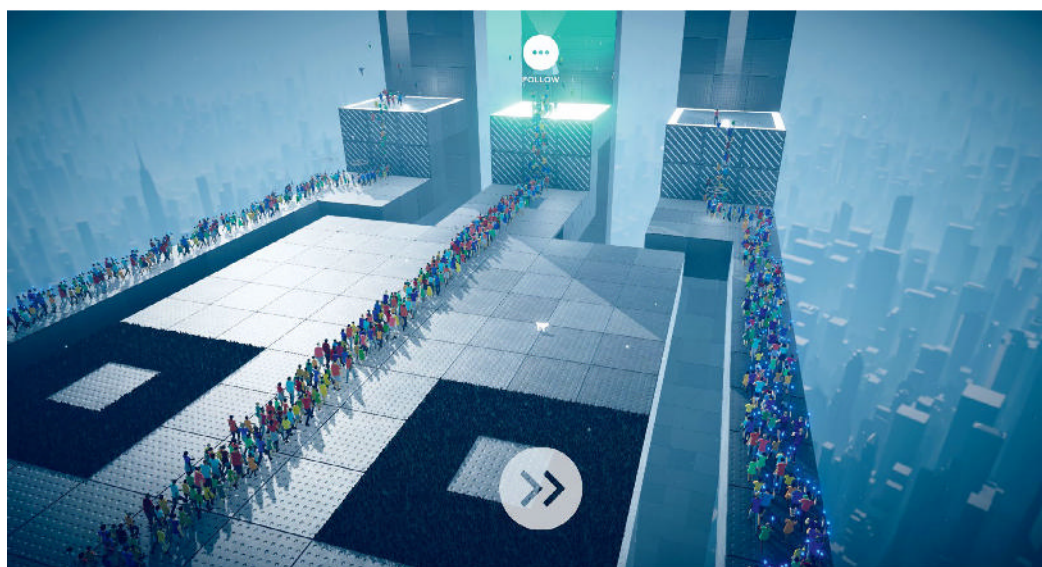
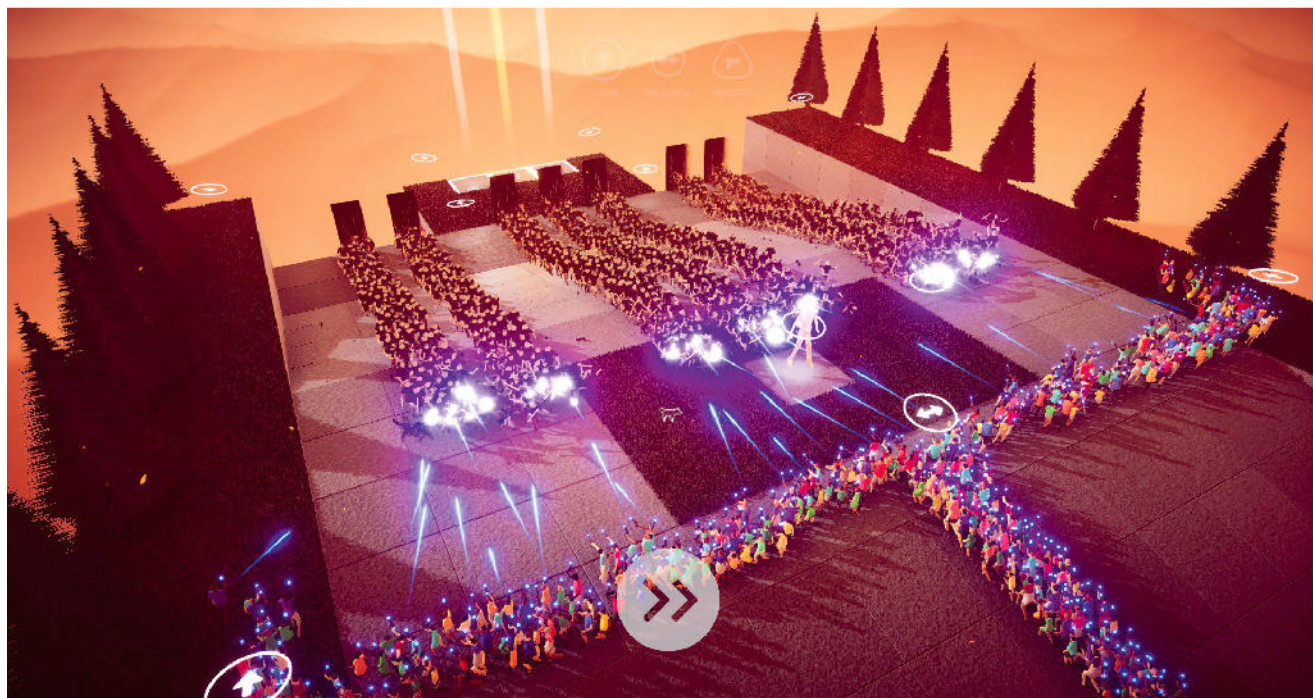
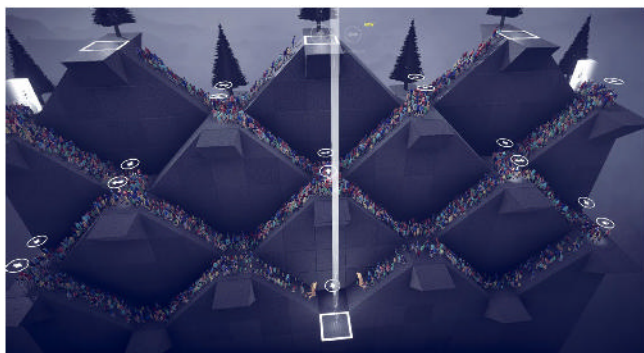
**But, crucially, not** always. Enhance and Tha introduce a string of twists to that formula. Some stages are paused from the outset, and you're asked to plot the entire route your humans will take before hitting the start button and watching the results (usually hilarious, horrifying or both on the first attempt) play out. An 'enemy' faction, the Others, must first be avoided, and then raced, since they have a similar lust for gold. Weapons – melee *and* ranged – turn the game into an arthouse RTS of sorts, requiring you to consider formation and timing, as well as tactics. (Destroying an entrance might limit their numbers on one side of a map, but are you leaving yourself short on the other, as they advance towards your base?) Eventually, you can instruct the crowd to follow you en masse, assembling large groups as well as leaving clusters behind to activate pressure plates that transform your environment in some way – and their numbers are now finite. And then it combines realtime with pause, as you move armed troops into position to make defensive barriers or lead the charge. There are even boss battles after a fashion: early on, you find yourself combining all you've learned in complex multi-faceted challenges, while by the end you're avoiding AOE attacks while taking on what can only be described as a humanoid murmur.

This is not, in other words, the same game at the beginning as it is at the end. For some, certainly those seeking to test their minds rather than their reflexes, that will be a problem. The less predictable elements mean a few stages are finicky to figure out: one forces us to rely on the (considerately included) video solutions, only to find we were on the right track but our unruly charges had failed to fulfil a vital part of their brief. But then to err is human, and without the anarchy wrought by those crowd physics, *Humanity* would lose some of its magic. It is hard to recall another game that actively changes genre partway through, and not only once; less so one that conjures thoughts of titles as diverse as *Chu Chu Rocket*, *Lemmings*, *Starcraft* and *Pikmin*. Amid those undeniable influences, this emerges as a bona fide original: one that fully merits a place alongside the other gems in Enhance's gold-tier catalogue.





**ABOVE** *Humanity's* story is carefully threaded through its stages via cryptic utterances and even the puzzles themselves. Cutscenes between chapters, meanwhile, are short and always doing something visually intriguing



**TOP** Several stages have one fixed solution, but you can admire their construction nonetheless: the common denominator is that pretty much every level gives you either something satisfying to accomplish or to behold. The best offer both.

**MAIN** It takes time to get to grips with the combat-focused stages, but you can sometimes stumble upon entertaining solutions. In one level we send a group leaping acrobatically over advancing Others, raining shots on them from above, as if commanding an army of Neos or John Wicks.

**LEFT** The audio score is worthy of note: calming and curiously unsettling at once, it furthers the notion that you're meant to feel conflicted by your actions

# Planet Of Lana

Like so many game developers of this generation, the films of Studio Ghibli have had a significant impact on the work of Swedish studio Wishfully. The studio cites *Spirited Away* as a key inspiration behind its debut – and even if you didn't know this before playing, it wouldn't take you long to notice the resemblances. In these vibrant hand-painted vistas, foliage sways in the breeze, strange little creatures scurry about in the woods, and a resplendent orchestral soundtrack ushers you through a rural idyll.

Yet the appeal of a Ghibli film extends beyond its art style, typically exploring environmentalist themes. Where lesser games would merely borrow the aesthetic, *Planet Of Lana* is clearly keen to tackle these broader ideas, and does so in a remarkably sophisticated way – using almost every tool imaginable to elicit a strong emotional response from the player. At the core of this story is the idea that a warped relationship between humans and nature favours no one: an imbalance that can be solved by creating a more interconnected society.

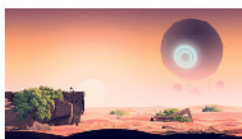
The early steps you take as Lana reveal that she's young, inexperienced, and out of her depth. Chasing her older sister through their village subtly guides you through the game's platforming mechanics, and establishes that Lana still has much to learn: when leaping to grab a plank, the wood gives way, leading to Lana falling into the water (and plenty of laughs from her sister). Though she gains access to new abilities later in the story, Lana always feels distinctly human – she isn't capable of heroic leaps, or outrageous feats of parkour, and that makes her endearing. The game demands you afford her extra time to land a particularly large jump, or climb up a cliff ledge, and this vulnerability only adds to the suspense when dealing with dangerous situations. As a result, you feel a keen sense of responsibility to protect her.

It doesn't take long for peril to arrive, in the form of an apocalyptic robot army. Scurrying back through what was, moments ago, a thriving community is a frightening and unnerving experience, the air pierced by screams and the bleeps of robots searching for signs of life. These spidery machines are animated in such a jerky way that they sometimes appear to have spotted you, before resuming the next stage of their routine.

Lana sets out on a mission to rescue her captured sister and village but, thankfully, isn't totally alone. She soon befriends a cat-like creature called Mui, capable of leaping great heights and connecting with other creatures. Together, they form two halves of a whole, with Lana capable of moving heavy items and helping Mui across water, and Mui able to reach distant levers or ropes to help Lana climb up. Their mutual dependency forms the beating heart of the game, and the way puzzles are introduced feels natural, with the components deftly woven into the storytelling. You

**Developer** Wishfully  
**Publisher** Thunderful  
**Format** PC (tested), Xbox One, Xbox Series  
**Release** May 23

Wishfully masterfully conducts the emotional highs and lows of a planetary odyssey



## SCORE DRAW

*Planet Of Lana's* visual appeal is obvious, but its audio score benefits from an equal amount of care. Accompanying every climactic moment in the story is a rich orchestral soundtrack composed by Takeshi Furukawa, probably best known for his similarly emotive work on *The Last Guardian*. In the quieter moments between orchestral swells, you can hear soothing soundscapes of grass and trees rustling in the wind. One moving sequence sees Lana run across the desert as the dawn arrives, with a powerful vocal track playing overhead. Music is woven into the fabric of the story itself, with a call-and-response motif repeated by the robots and their giant mothership. It's a haunting, mournful sound – one that is eventually revealed to hold deeper symbolic meaning.

first meet Mui after releasing her from a box-like trap, for instance, which you then climb on to reach the exit. The puzzles become surprisingly challenging, demanding a mixture of platforming abilities, timing, and reasoning. Sometimes this is a matter of fighting your own instincts – you often have to make the terrifying decision to attract an enemy towards one character while using the other to solve the puzzle.

**Much of the** game comprises this style of puzzle-solving, but in the story's more action-packed moments it shifts toward intense quick-time events. This could easily feel jarring, but the change in mechanics is deliberate, successfully conveying that the situation is urgent or emotionally charged. And the cinematography in these sequences is handled masterfully, with the camera panning in to capture intimate moments, or expanding out to reveal vast, intimidating landscapes. A particularly memorable sequence involves a chase through a desert, which after the slow, steady pace of the early game offers a thrilling burst of speed and momentum. Another standout scene sets up a confrontation between Mui and a terrifying monster, the camera panning in to show the tiny creature standing tall against the teeth of a giant.

Wishfully has a clear eye for the cinematic, which extends beyond camerawork into creating a sense of voyage through diverse environments. Early in the game, you're given a glimpse of the robot army's central hub: a massive eyeball that looms on the horizon. Much like a certain fantasy trilogy, this serves as a landmark against which to measure your progress – and as an ominous reminder of the enemy you face.

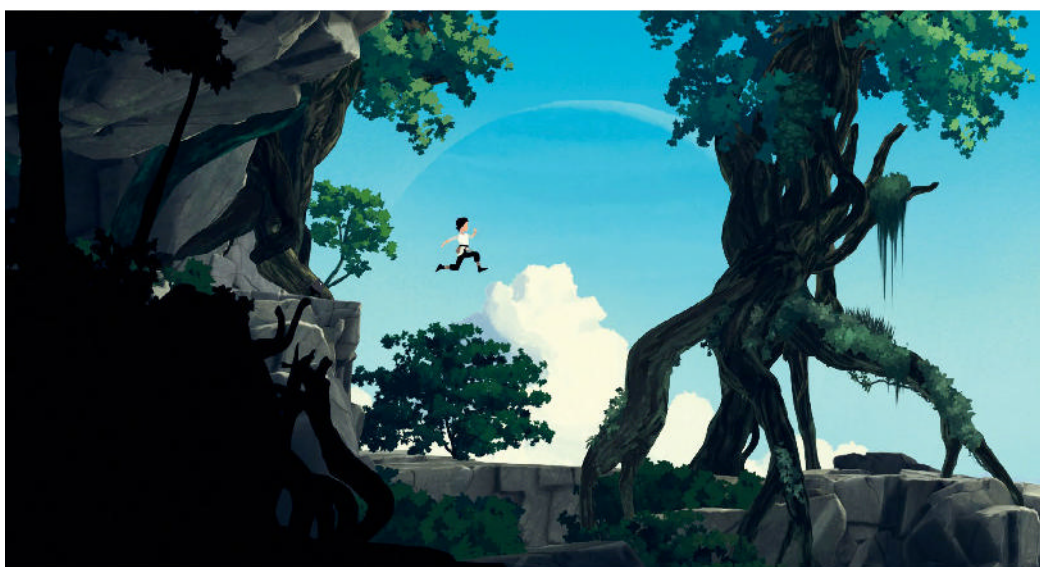
One of *Planet Of Lana's* most understated triumphs is its ability to convey so much without intelligible dialogue. The characters speak in an alien language or use simple animal noises. Characterisation relies on the tone used by the voice actors in combination with animations and abilities (Mui's stubborn refusal to swim being one example). Clues about the planet's history, meanwhile, are dotted throughout the world, taking the form of cryptic cave paintings and artefacts carefully positioned in order to raise questions.

It's a sensitively told story that's brought in to land with a thunderous final chapter, delivering suspense, spectacle, and a deeply moving resolution. Wishfully masterfully conducts the emotional highs and lows of a planetary odyssey, creating a story that feels Ghibli-inspired while establishing an identity of its own. Every moment feels considered – designed to challenge the player's assumptions with a puzzle or narrative twist. It's a story that feels epic, but also full of heart – and, given the real world's environmental crisis, one that provokes reflection on the distorted relationship between humans and nature in the modern age.





**ABOVE** Lana's adventure takes her to many strange locations, including the ruins of a vast spaceship. Fortunately, she's able to control the machinery here in order to navigate through the craft's wreckage



**MAIN** Tension ratchets up as you near the robot mothership.  
**ABOVE** The pacing of your journey is tuned considerably, with plenty of serene moments between threatening situations.  
**LEFT** Don't be fooled by the soft and colourful art style – *Planet Of Lana* can be surprisingly brutal

# Darkest Dungeon II

**A**mong all the variables in Redhook's gruellingly brilliant sequel, the one that truly elevates it is hope. That nagging sense that the world could be better, even when it's gone to the eldritch gods, manifests here in a vehicle and a flame. A lone horse-drawn carriage called The Last Hope transports you towards a claw-like mountain to save the world, mounted on its roof a dwindling torch representing all that remains of the precious resource. Should you die before reaching your destination — and you will, often — the flame lives on in candles awarded for your efforts that you exchange for upgrades, passing a little extra hope to the next band of heroes.

This simple metaphor is a spur to resistance that feels appropriate. Faced with a land decaying, you either accept a wager to force change against near impossible odds, or wait for ruin. Yes, you'll fail, repeatedly, because the powers that be are unfathomably great. But take nourishment in little victories along the way, in learning from mistakes, in keeping a cause alive. The concept of unlocking stuff after each run in a Roguelike has never felt so meaningful.

Equally, it's hope that transforms *Darkest Dungeon II* from a compelling turn-based RPG into one of those precious games where your experience mirrors the (mis)fortunes of its characters. Your handpicked crew of four are subject to relationship fluctuations, pain and insanity. Yet they also bounce back, grow stronger and gain respite if you complete an area and reach the inn at its end. With each turn of their mental states, your own hope burgeons and wanes.

The format of your journeys is crucial here. Dropping dungeon crawls for forking carriage rides may look like petty theft from *Slay The Spire's* structure, but it's perfectly adapted to suit a game about driving forward to meet fate head on. In fact, the driving itself isn't especially involving, as you steer down stretches of road over piles of debris that occasionally cough up items. But these sequences force you to contemplate the rotting crops and burning towns lining the way, and appreciate the toll it's taking on your team, who bicker and lament within the squeeze of the carriage.

These paths are equally a means for *Darkest Dungeon II* to remind you that you're not fully in control. Arrive in a new area and its encounter nodes are only partially revealed, so every route is half planned, half left to chance. Between these nodes, you run into roadblocks that trigger battles, traps that shred your wheels and armour, or a dense mist which hastens the decline of your flame. Then, when you come to a stop, the range of possible events is wider than on a *Slay The Spire* map. Some are helpful, such as caches of items and trinkets, or a tower that unveils the road ahead. Yet of course such boons are scattered sparingly among hideouts of local denizens, waiting to strip you of your skin. You

**Developer/publisher**  
Red Hook Studios  
**Format** PC  
**Release** Out now

**It's the terror and promise of the unknown that makes this such exquisite sequel craft**



## DARKEST SOULS

A crucial shift from the first game is that characters are not merely classes now, but individuals with personal backstories. On your travels, you can visit Shrines Of Reflection, where a single team member recalls part of their tale, unlocking a new ability in the process. These short episodes, some of which involve turn-based tasks themselves, soon become an essential part of the game's lore. As in any good Lovecraft story, they chart the fall of their subjects, whether due to hubris or unfortunate circumstance. We discover that the Graverobber, for example, comes from money, but also a violent marriage she had to escape through murderous means. Through these portraits, *Darkest Dungeon II's* world is recoded as a reflection of sin and inner torment, which only heroic sacrifice can redeem.

believe they would as well, thanks to 3D models that pop with festering detail and ghoulish animations, as in the way a skeleton soldier raises its visor using the arrow stuck in its eye hollow as a lever.

**More than ever**, choices in battle can have glorious or catastrophic effects, as judgement and luck fuse into bloody drama. The smartest addition is the token system, which lays out the rules of buffs and status effects in neat icons. At a glance, you can see which enemy has a 50/50 shot at dodging your next attack or is winding up a critical blow.

RNG still oversees events, though, down to D&D-style saving throws that decide whether reaching zero hit points really does end your life. That can make for disheartening moments, especially since monsters can slip through death's fingers in the same way, perhaps issuing one more telling attack before you can finish them off. But Redhook has spent years fine-tuning these systems, and it shows. You can't stop bad luck, but you can shift the percentages.

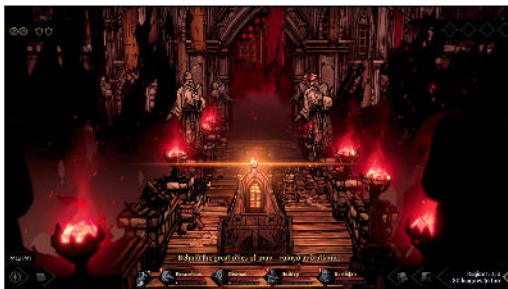
Still, *Darkest Dungeon II* is tough to beat even once, by completing three areas and a boss, and doubly so once you move to the second of its five 'confessions' (difficulty levels of sorts). In particular, difficulty spikes await to impale you in monster lairs, where you face two waves of enemies then a mighty abomination. Sure, you can choose to escape after one battle, but after the first confession it's compulsory to defeat at least one boss before reaching the mountain. And these are brutal scraps, liable to inflict casualties even if you win.

Yet you don't blink before starting a fresh journey. As a message before the title screen explains, this is a game about making the best of a bad situation. Never forget you're in Lovecraft country here. If you succeeded frequently, or felt empowered for long stretches, it would be an affront to the pestilent atmosphere. How many cosmic horror stories have happy endings?

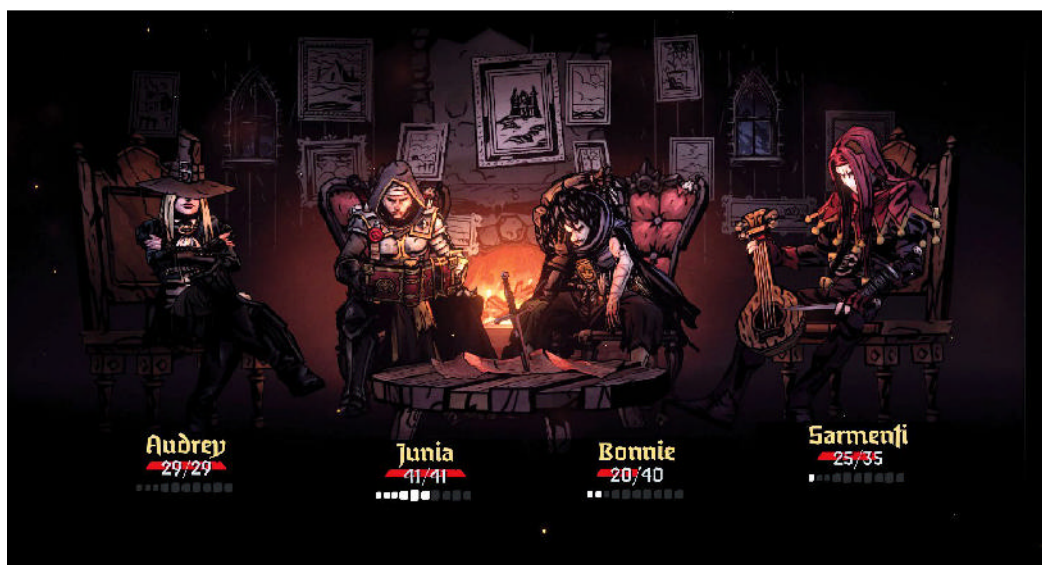
Besides, miracles do happen, sometimes by design. *Darkest Dungeon II* lets you equip an item called the radiant flame at the start of a journey, which provides various boosts for the cost of a few candles. Better still, if you leave it behind, its power grows for the next trip, so feel free to experiment with characters, formations, abilities, equipment and so on; then, when you're ready for a serious attempt, take advantage of its maximum bonuses. It's a way to take the edge off oppressive design without compromising a vision.

Even if you don't use it, there are so many different ways to approach each run that the potential of a better outcome never seems fully beyond reach. It's the terror and promise of the unknown that makes this such exquisite sequel craft, and somehow spins unrelenting darkness into optimism. In short, *Darkest Dungeon II* is everything you could hope for.





**ABOVE** There are five main environments, each with its own vicious inhabitants that test you in different ways. As you make preparations for entering the Sprawl, for instance, you'll want to raise your fire resistance



**TOP** Narration again comes from the thick gravel voice of Wayne June, bringing chilling gravitas to proceedings. "Are you shaken?" he asks after your first encounter. "There is so much worse in store"

**MAIN** It's not always smart to avoid combat, even when you have the option, since battles on the road reduce loathing build-up and reward you with ability points.

**LEFT** The game features 11 characters at launch. The new addition is Bonnie, the Runaway, who specialises in fire attacks

# The Last Case Of Benedict Fox

Unlike most Metroidvania characters, Benedict Fox can't double jump. He is, however, fused with a ghostly demon called the Companion, which can use its ethereal tentacles to give him an extra boost. When Benedict jumps, a second button press sees the octopoid appendages shoot out, stick to a nearby surface, and yank him up again. Which, to all intents and purposes, is a double jump after all.

Except it isn't, quite, in ways that really matter. No, in keeping with the game's Lovecraftian themes, this slimy leg-up is more like the double jump corrupted, as if someone took the simple reliability of this genre staple and subjected it to foul experiments, driving it to madness with the impregnation of those tentacles. Now it's horribly deformed. When you press the jump button in mid-air, the result depends on the proximity of a wall, ledge or ceiling to sucker onto. In open areas, such as some of the game's combat spaces, it doesn't work.

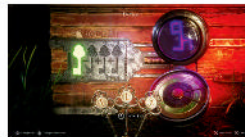
In time, you may learn to live with this, but not before it adds to a creeping feeling that *The Last Case Of Benedict Fox* may not actually like you very much. Barring some smart puzzles (see 'Luscious locks') and a sprinkle of forward-thinking ideas, it's irritating and belligerent in ways that feel, well, intentional. As a take on Lovecraft, you might argue that this meanness gels with themes of spiralling madness and horrifying interventions from beyond. But in a month when *Darkest Dungeon II* expertly shows how that's done, such theses don't hold water. The maddening in this case comes from obfuscation and a paucity of polish.

Not that there's much horror to speak of here anyway. *Benedict Fox* is tonally torn between big-picture lore about an occult-infused 1920s America and exploring an intimate tragedy, and manages to be neither harrowing or haunting. PI Benedict, an escapee from an anti-occult sect, finds himself investigating the death of his long-lost father, using the Companion's ability to dive into the dimension of 'Limbo' and seek out the dead man's memories. The story that unfolds there about the misadventures of Benedict Sr and his second wife might have been poignant, but instead it struggles for oxygen amid a back plot about poorly defined rival factions. Add to that Disney-esque character design and a script that aims for wit over gravitas, and the brittle mix rather cancels itself out.

Even the handsome scenery, well worth drinking in from time to time (the mosquito net covering the four-poster in the master bedroom is sumptuously textured), rarely manages to spark feeling. Limbo is a notably surreal land, combining eldritch abominations (read: tentacles) with fragments of a man's life — heaps of furniture, rogue wooden doors, and so on. Yet individual areas want for striking architecture or memorable geography. Scenes of note, such as a large rotating room, a forced-scrolling chase sequence, and trips into torchlit

**Developer** Plot Twist  
**Publisher** Rogue Games  
**Format** PC (tested), Xbox One, Xbox Series  
**Release** Out now

Scenes of note, such as a large rotating room, can be counted on the tendrils of one squid



## LUSCIOUS LOCKS

*The Last Case Of Benedict Fox* fares much better when it comes to puzzles, not least those involving locked doors and the methods required to prise them open. Visually, the pick here is the Kogai lock, a gruesome creation made of flesh, fingers and teeth that gives way to a series of speedy button presses once you acquire a certain tool. More mechanically impressive, though, is a whole series of code locks secured behind a system of runic symbols. To open these, you'll need to crack a cipher, and a range of devices, notes and diaries reveals how to translate it in stages throughout the first half of the game. It's a delightful piece of puzzle craft, which provides the one real sense of achievement in the game when it clicks into place.

darkness, can be counted on the tendrils of one squid. And since many of these are infuriating in their own way, they hardly constitute a welcome change of pace.

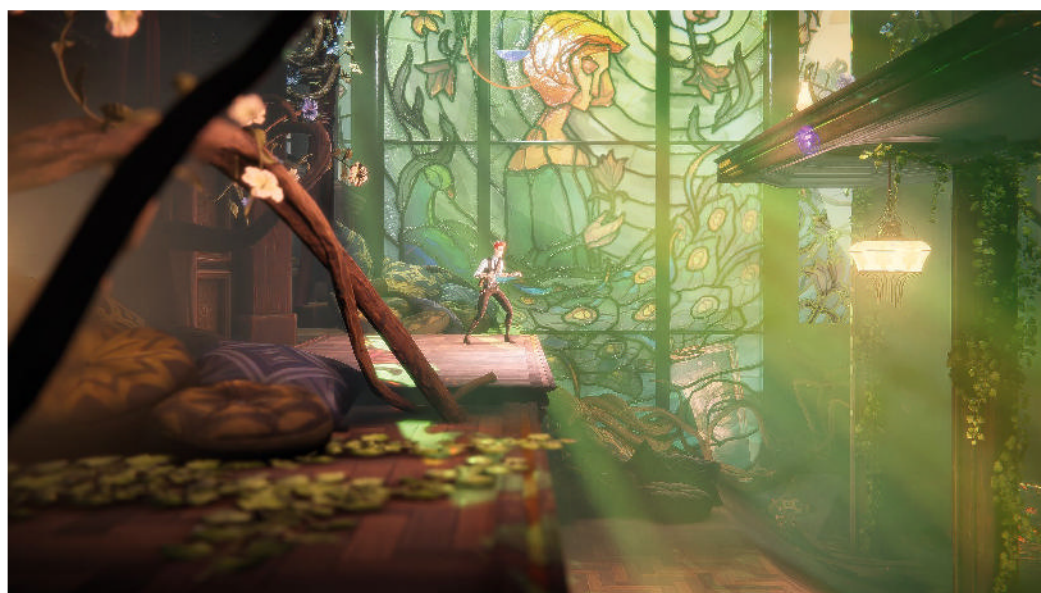
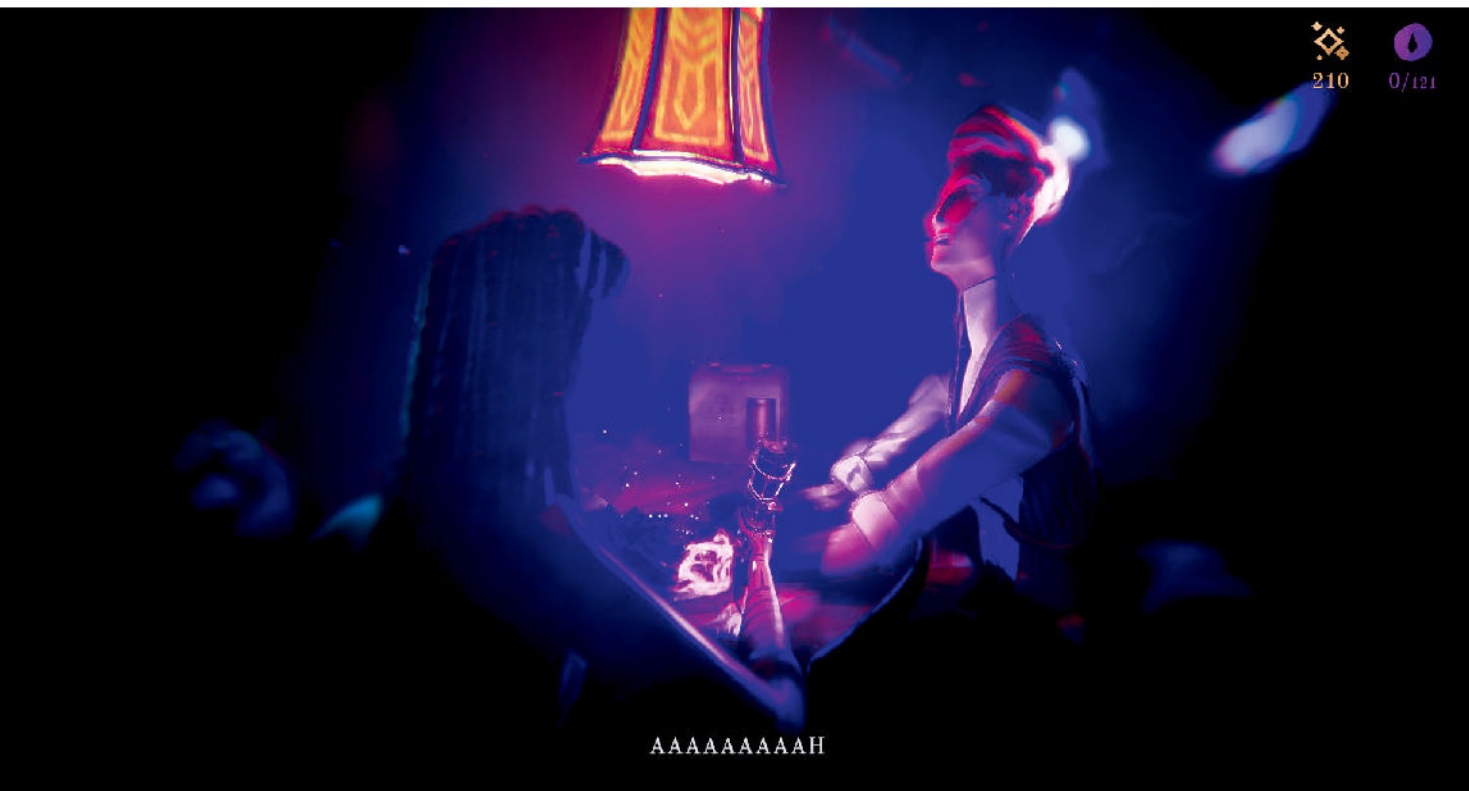
The same can be said of the resistance you face on your travels, in the form of some sad-looking monsters and a platoon of humans who have also forced their way into Limbo. In light of the repeated visits you'll be making to each location, *Benedict Fox* makes a sensible concession here, rewarding you with precious ink for upgrades the first time you beat each enemy, then reducing their hit points for subsequent encounters. But that's the only saving grace in messy skirmishes where you parry and stab to charge up a single-shot flare gun, then let it rip for a more decisive blow.

**Indeed, skittish enemy** behaviour reveals itself to be a problem the moment you engage. A little flash that signals when one of the sorry zombies is about to strike appears too early, for example, tricking you into parrying before it's time. Still, at least when that happens your opponent is actually visible, not waiting silently in the wings to slap you as you step through a doorway. Other tricks up your opponents' sleeves include knocking you off a platform, then standing guard on its edge ready to smack you again each time you try to jump back up. These are scenes to be endured, not enjoyed, with any potential sparks of pleasure quickly stamped out. Even the mild thrill of parrying a projectile and returning it to sender is doused as you watch the ricochet drift harmlessly over their head. The deeper we get into Limbo, the more tempted we are to enable immortality mode.

Minus the combat, *Benedict Fox* is Metroidvania reduced to its most basic form, where all that matters are the platforms you can reach and the doors you can open. Limbo and Benedict's father's house — a hub where a handful of characters gather — function well enough as a vast puzzle, segmented by locks and obstacles. But much of your 'investigation' takes place on the map screen instead of in the field: deciding where to teleport next, grabbing a key item, hitting a dead-end, then warping somewhere else. Rarely is there an opportunity to truly explore.

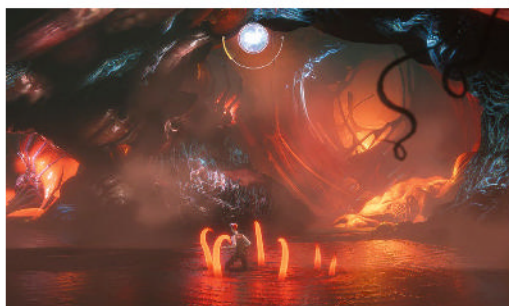
It's not as though navigating each screen is a worthy challenge either — as far as the platforming side of your adventure goes, double and later triple jumping is really all there is. Some other abilities the Companion can learn, such as a ground pound and a grab-pull manoeuvre, have combat applications and allow you to break certain obstacles, but change nothing in terms of how you move around. Never do you have to use the Companion's tentacle reach to swing across gaps, say, or anything else so vaguely adventurous. Then again, when even double jumping is such a fudge, perhaps that's a blessing in disguise.





**ABOVE** Ability upgrades are granted through the medium of tattoos, fuelled by ink gathered from monsters, and applied by an appropriately mysterious occultist.

**LEFT** Constant backtracking is made more arduous by level design infected with ineffective shortcuts and pointless one-way systems



**ABOVE** Benedict's reactions to the freakish surroundings tend to be muted, thanks to flat voice performances that sit in contrast to the rich visual style



**BELOW** Enemies have a habit of sticking together in groups, making it hard to see what's doing what

# Minecraft Legends

We're always a little wary of fabricated genre names. Hybrid labels cooked up by studios to describe their creations often tend more toward the aspirational than the descriptive. But if they're taken as statements of intent, Mojang Studios' positioning of *Minecraft Legends* is an intriguing one. Meshing the base building and resource gathering of realtime strategy, the mob stomping of MOBAs and *Pikmin*-like minion management, 'action strategy' seems on first impression a decent label. It's also something of a misnomer, and one we can only imagine is intended to euphemistically describe this mash-up that wobbles under its own porous weight. Ultimately, we'd suggest 'monotonous turtling' as a more apt description.

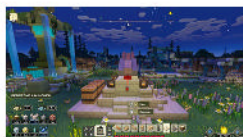
Ditching the typical strategic birds-eye view, you're brought down to earth to take control of a square-headed hero and defend the Overworld from an invading force of piglins (*Minecraft*'s Nether-dwelling porcine foes). Their fortresses are dotted across a procedurally generated campaign map, in between villages that need protecting when the sun goes down. It leads into a steady cadence — taking the fight to the piglins during the day, before fast-travelling back to whichever village has earned their attention at night — with room to explore the Overworld between battles. Resources, from basic wood and stone to rarer diamond and coal, can be gathered on the fly, as vast areas are picked clean at your command. Troops, too, can be recruited in seconds from portable spawn points, giving you time to explore.

Those forces, though, won't get far on their own, and must be led into battle using a clunky command system. Nearby troops can be rallied to follow you or sent charging a short distance ahead, and though it's possible to deliver more precise instructions (issuing an order to a specific type of unit, for instance), delivering them is so unintuitive that it's rarely worth the effort contorting your fingers. With no way of usefully delineating orders between troops, fights descend into muddled brawls, as blobs of mobs smack into each other until one side keels over. It's not helped that you lead an army of dunces: units will sit idly by as they're attacked at range, healing golems often buff one another rather than neighbouring troops, and friendly units frequently wander off the sides of bridges and cliffs when tailing you. The combination of poor unit pathing and imprecise controls makes for a frustrating pairing.

Not that precision is needed much. Each unit notionally fulfils a specific function — stone golems for destroying structures, wood golems for ranged infantry damage — but any semblance of the rock-paper-scissors design quickly falls by the wayside. Each Piglin fortress amounts to little more than a series of defensive structures and enemy spawn points that must be destroyed one by one to clear a path to the centre. Every siege follows the same template: assemble a handful of

**Developer** Mojang Studios, Blackbird Interactive  
**Publisher** Xbox Game Studios  
**Format** PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series  
**Release** Out now

Fights descend into muddled brawls, as blobs of mobs smack into each other until one side keels over



## REDSTONE RODEO

While several of *Minecraft*'s rock types appear as resources, spread across surface veins in the Overworld, redstone is perhaps the most precious. Store up a big enough supply and you'll be able to construct the Redstone Launcher: an explosive catapult capable of destroying turrets, spawners and, crucially, fortress walls in single splash-damage blows. Of the handful of defensive towers and traps that can be built, it's the only one that must be operated directly, handing you manual control over aiming and firing. It's gimmicky, but adds some much-needed interactivity to sieges — though it's grating that the hands-on controls are more precise than issuing commands to your mainline units. An army of explosive flat-pack catapults? If only.

troops, rush them between as many defensive structures as you can topple before they're defeated, before returning to your spawners to whip up another force. Later fortresses are spread across cliffs and chasms that must be navigated by constructing bridges and ramps to create a route forward, adding a welcome element of verticality (though sometimes made irritating by your units' tendency to answer the call of the void). But other attempts to heighten the tension, including the introduction of shield-generating towers that must be destroyed before you can throw a punch at the enemy portal, only prolong the dull repetition of each assault.

**That monotony doesn't** really let up. Advanced golems can be unlocked in the late game, and familiar creatures such as zombies, skeletons and creepers join your roster after you complete side missions. But they're merely beefier forms of the rudimentary golems you start with. Even resource-hungry units such as the brick golem, which looks to offer some variety with its powerful group-shield ability, becomes just another lumbering mass in our mess of an army, unable to be usefully positioned by the restrictive control scheme. Creepers add some explosive excitement, but when the piglins recapture their homestead, we find ourselves unwilling to rescue them. By this point, we're skipping the optional battles, preferring to race towards the end.

Night-time village holdouts, meanwhile, are more streamlined. Piglins will mark their next target during the day, leaving you to build walls, distribute defensive towers and spawn units ready for that night's attack. Our minimal resource pool in early defences keeps us scrambling down to the wire, though it's not long before we discover that several layers of walls and dense tower placements can clear up the most imposing force. Unit management takes a back seat, and your character's contribution is largely forgettable. Able only to swing your sword to damage the weakest piglins, you're often left standing around, waiting for your defences to slog through long, invisible enemy health bars.

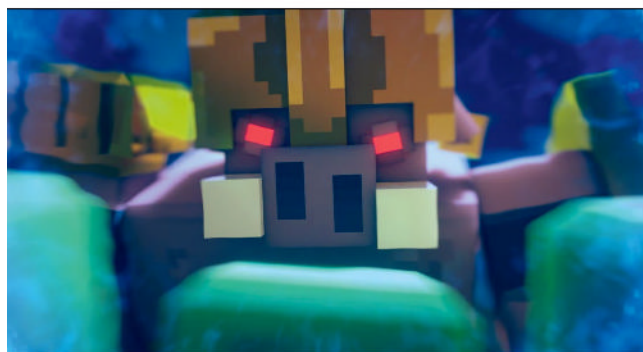
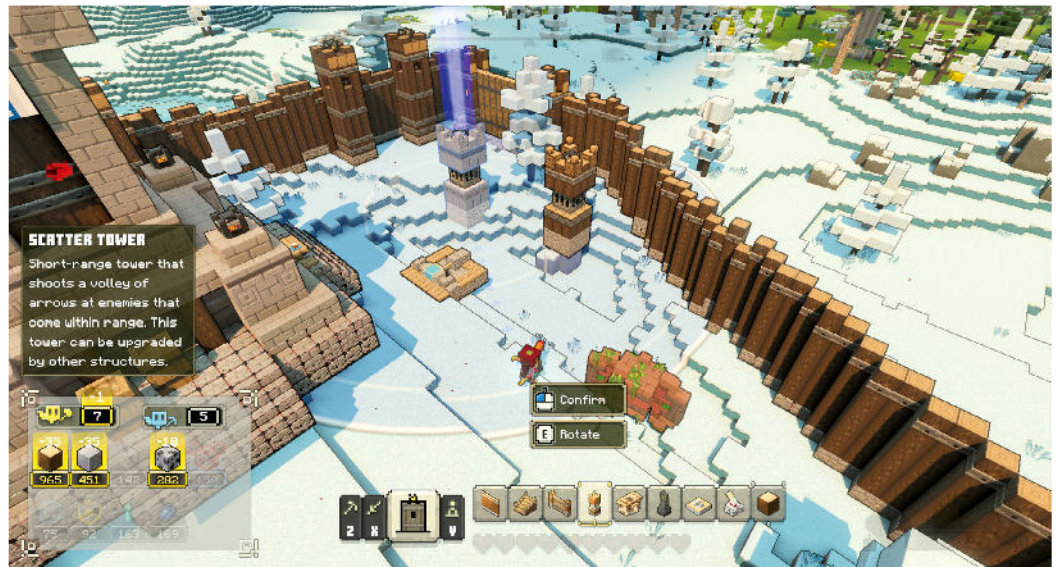
All of this works better in PvP, if only because the subdued havoc that naturally accompanies competitive multiplayer is a thrill in itself. Procedurally generated maps that stitch together familiar biomes add cosmetic life to skirmishes, and the cel-shaded art style cleverly mutes *Minecraft*'s garish colours. In time, however, these novelties lose much of their charm, and even younger audiences might not hold on for long (though perhaps just long enough, from Microsoft's point of view). That sentient creepers will explode themselves on command is unintentionally chilling enough; more uncomfortable is the wave of microtransactions that promises to follow release. An online marketplace on the main menu lists hero skins, mounts and more dollar signs to come, doing little to enliven an already withered seed.



**RIGHT** Alongside a few offensive structures – arrow towers, ice traps and electrifying obelisks – are a few buildings that buff their power, speed and explosiveness.

**MAIN** Friendly and opposing units clump together like magnets, and it doesn't take too long for sieges to become rather confused.

**BOTTOM** Regular cutscenes show the piglins preparing to invade the overworld. They're wonderfully animated slapstick shorts that should muster a few chuckles



**ABOVE** The map is dotted with nine piglin strongholds split between three hordes. The individual factions have a few distinct units and structures between them, although their thematic differences are more memorable



# Horizon: Forbidden West – Burning Shores

Call it the power of the cloud. From wispy cirrus to pillowy cumulus and thick nimbostratus, pulsing ominously with blue lightning, their presence above the archipelago formerly known as Los Angeles is purportedly the reason why *Burning Shores* is a PS5 exclusive. True, with another avian machine introduced here, you'll spend more time airborne than before; the old 2D clouds were thus deemed unfit for purpose. Even so, it's hard not to wonder whether they were essential enough to exclude PS4 players.

Restraint, of course, has never been one of Guerrilla's strongest suits, and that's not about to change here. You'll be stopped in your tracks by the sight of some overgrown and flooded LA landmarks, but the same could be said about the sometimes awkward exploration, as you clumsily negotiate settings that have been built with form rather than function at top of mind. At its best, the spectacle is dazzling — sometimes literally, as your view is occluded by lens flare from the sun or glare from a machine's lights — but when everything is vying to catch your eye, nothing can really *hold* it.

Such commitment to excess slightly sours two otherwise intriguing new opponents. The Bilegut is a giant robotic frog that hops about while launching

Navigated via skiff, the flooded areas around LA lack the allure of, say, *Wind Waker's* open sea. Elsewhere, you'll use ballistae to fire handholds into gaps between broken ladders: a promising idea that in practice adds busywork

**Developer/publisher** SIE  
(Guerrilla Games)  
**Format** PS5  
**Release** Out now



## PERFORMANCE MODE

There can be few complaints about the cast. Sam Witwer is a hoot as antagonist Walter Londra, a billionaire surrounded by acolytes, who made a fortune from mining and is building a rocket (any resemblance to any social-media website owners is, presumably, coincidental). While you'll eagerly anticipate his comeuppance, the final scenes with Lance Reddick's Sylens are laced with pathos. "I am grateful for your extraordinary contributions," Reddick says. Us, too.

bee-like spawn. Then there's the enormous, tentacled Horus, which you face in a final encounter we suspect would have been beyond the older console's technological reach. It's one of the more ostentatious examples of the pros *and* cons of triple-A extravagance we've seen: a battle that strives for *Shadow Of The Colossus*-like scale is spoiled by sluggish, inconsistent platforming, a camera that struggles to cope with both the exterior *and* interior of this unwieldy enemy, and Aloy's motormouth, as we race around to scan the heatsink she can't stop pointing out. Faring better is the Waterwing mount, star of an exhilarating — if slightly truncated — set-piece in which you must time your plunges into the deep to avoid incoming missiles.

The most significant addition is Quen marine Seyka, with whom Aloy forms a bond that goes beyond friendship. Yet the two fight more often than they flirt, and the need to either level or stock up between story missions means they don't spend enough time together for the would-be emotional climax to fully land. That's no fault of Kylie Liya Page and Ashly Burch, whose heartfelt performances across all three potential endings (none of which, as has been suggested, erase Aloy's sexuality) *almost* make it work. Enough, certainly, to feel a degree of pity for those denied firsthand experience of the start of this seemingly important relationship — another cloud on this particular *Horizon*.

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# Mr Sun's Hatbox

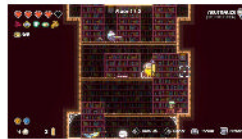
The rescue mission is going swimmingly. Expert infiltrator 'Lanky' McFadden has left a trail of snapped necks and discarded millinery in his wake, but he's yet to be noticed — at least, not by anyone who survives. A security camera watching over the cage that holds his target is blinded with the final round from his silenced pistol. McFadden goes to collect his prize — and slips on a banana peel. This puts him in range of a discarded boxing-glove hat, which in turn launches him into the waiting mouth of a shark.

*Mr Sun's Hatbox* takes the inventive, knockabout stealth action of *Metal Gear Solid V* and attempts to condense it down to fit into a *Spelunky*-ish pixel-art Roguelike platformer. In doing so, vitally, it draws out the slapstick inherent to both. *MSGV*'s Fulton balloons have always been funny — a sleeping guard hanging limp for a moment before zipping suddenly into the sky — and their deployment here picks up the joke, asking you to exfiltrate not only the game's spherical, waddling guards but also cartons of eggs, tight coils of dung, and siege catapults that can be worn on the head.

From *Spelunky*, meanwhile, it takes that moment where everything goes wrong at once, where you suddenly understand — too late — the Rube Goldberg

Random combinations of traits and nicknames are another reliable source of comedy. We'll not soon forget 'Icky' Clemons, the cowardly cannibal librarian, nor 'Gunner' Joseph, with his all-consuming fear of firearms

**Developer** Kenny Sun  
**Publisher** Raw Fury  
**Format** PC (tested), Switch  
**Release** Out now



## FATAL COACTION

The biggest laughs produced by *Mr Sun's Hatbox* are those shared with another player alongside us on the sofa — but be warned: while solo sneaking is likely to end in disaster, co-op all but guarantees it. Guards will react to a player's presence before a warning can leave your lips and, as in *Spelunky*, the presence of a second body only serves to extend those chains of improbable events. It's a quick way to burn through your base's personnel and test your personal relationships.

machine that's been built in collaboration between the procedural generation and your own actions. Except the components of that machine are borrowed from the same prop-comedy tradition, as if the game is gently nudging you to laugh at your inevitable misfortune.

Whether you survive or perish, after each brief sortie — a handful of minutes at most — it's back to base, where any guards extracted by Fulton can be brainwashed and employed to staff your research facilities for future buffs, or sent on missions. Guiding these decisions are each character's mix of *Rogue Legacy*-style traits. A cannibal who can eat corpses to regain health makes for a handy infiltrator; someone whose conscience causes them to hop around uselessly after snapping a neck might be better off in the lab.

As well as Mother Base, there's a hint of *XCOM* to this HQ. And, at the game's very best, all these systems, borrowed from disparate places, work together to achieve the same kind of elastic-band forward momentum that drives the latter game. Over time, however, as the names pile up, it becomes exhausting to pick through menu after menu and decide who to assign to each task — so much so that losing even a skilled agent during a mission can sometimes come as a relief. In a game that was shooting for a more desperate tone, that could well be its undoing. Here, though, each death is just another opportunity for a punchline.

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# Tron: Identity

**M**ike Bithell says he might be the only game director who doesn't secretly want to make films. In some ways that's a pity — certainly, his latest project suggests he has a taut, 90-minute single-location thriller in him. Because that is, by and large, what *Identity* is: this stylish, choice-driven visual novel pairs a compact detective noir story with Solitaire-like puzzles. It's not always a harmonious mix, and occasionally the presentation crosses the narrow dividing line between sleekly minimalistic and, well, slightly cheap-looking. But between Dan Le Sac's brooding score and Bithell's genre-savvy storytelling, it packs plenty of rich atmosphere and world-building into its slender runtime.

After a close encounter with a light cycle (that the IP's most iconic element is dispensed with in a matter of moments is a clear statement of intent), you're held within the confines of the Repository, a towering structure at the heart of Tron's computer world. Cast as Query, a detective program, it's your job to look into the cause of an explosion in the vault at the building's core. Your early responses determine whether gruff security program Grish accompanies you; the game shows its working so you can see how your choices guide your investigation, if not entirely steer the story. The

No program is quite what they seem on the surface, though while Bithell's script keeps us guessing, our instincts serve us well. Word to the wise: trying to keep everyone alive isn't necessarily be the wisest course of action

**Developer/publisher** Bithell Games  
**Format** PC, Switch (tested)  
**Release** Out now



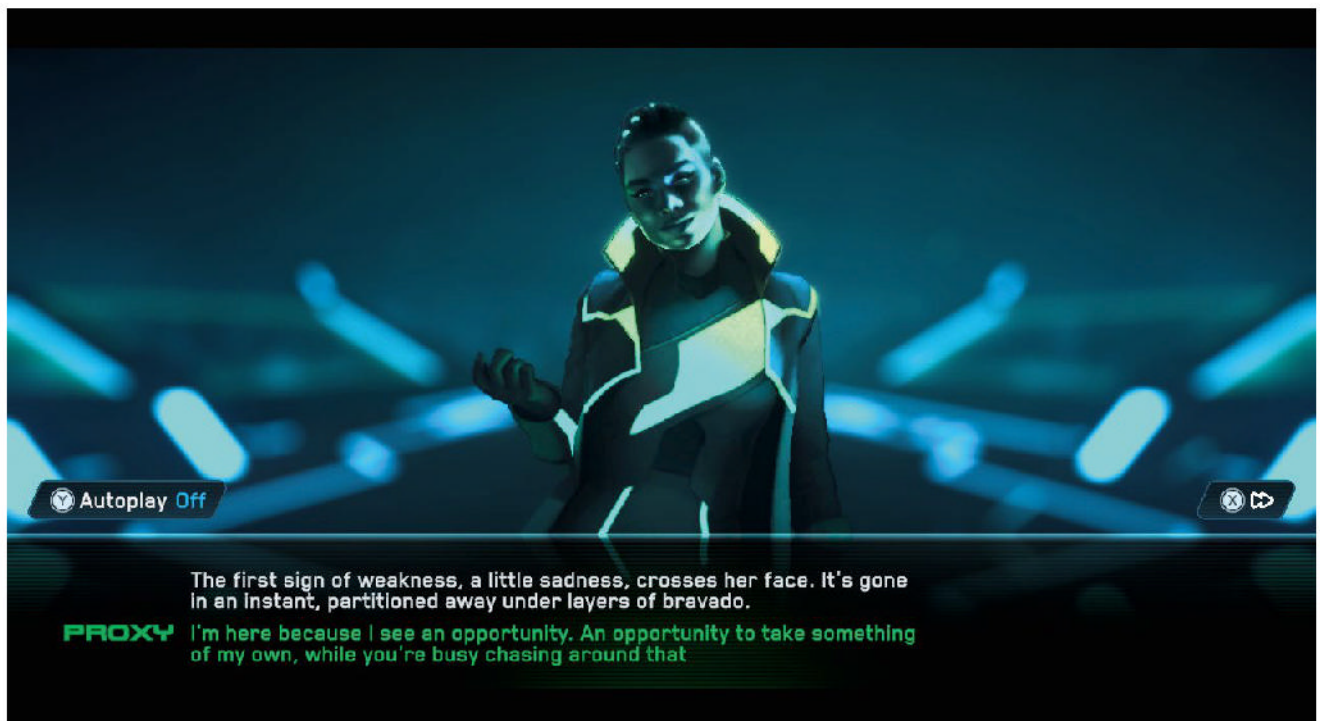
## FRAG OUT

With the ability to undo moves that might otherwise leave you unable to progress, and the option to let the CPU take up to three turns for you, the defragmentation puzzles can be muddled through without much thought (the tiles that spawn extras if they're not removed would make it an awfully long-winded process, mind). It's worth trying to do them efficiently, though, since it's good prep for the self-contained Endless Mode, where you'll find daily challenges and timed runs.

detonation has apparently affected every program in the vicinity to differing degrees, from bewildered guard Cass to smarmy admin Prinz, allowing for a change of pace as you defrag their identity disks. Here, you pair tiles (which must either be adjacent or, arbitrarily, three spaces apart) with similar icons or numbers, repeating the process until you've removed enough clutter to restore their memories.

With new rules and tile variants introduced steadily, these puzzles are fine in their own right. But try as Bithell might to fit them neatly into the plot (and he does try), they feel like an unwanted interruption when you'd rather get to the bottom of the mystery at hand. Yet that's testament to the story, and to the strength of the characterisation: from an enigmatic librarian to an imposing visitor, each has hidden depths, their motivations and philosophies teased out over conversations that would be captivating even without the sometimes off-kilter camera angles deployed to make them more visually dynamic. Several late-game exchanges throb with tension, the knowledge that your actions could potentially lead to one of several programs being de-rezzed forcing you to consider your choices with great care. There's enough to have us wondering about a more expansive sequel, with a budget to match. Though perhaps it's the constraints that give this striking noir — the most invested we've been in the Tron universe for 40 years — such a strong identity of its own.

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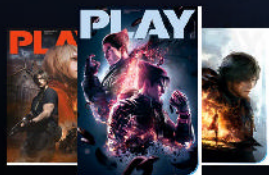


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# Tekken 8

Goodbye, last-gen! How PS5's power is being unleashed in a stunning fighter worthy of Tekken's legacy



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# Pathologic 2

How a tale of sickness and displacement inspired  
by Russian literature became a chilling prophecy

**BY ANDREI PECHALIN**

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**Developer** Ice-Pick Lodge **Publisher** TinyBuild **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2019



**T**he four years since *Pathologic 2*'s release have made the act of donning its face mask a rather uncanny experience, something only underscored by the item's inventory description: "This mask resembles those worn by medical personnel, but instead of sterile gauze, it's made of dirty cloth, and instead of clinging tightly to my face, it hangs loose". It's a reminder that sometimes, if the world twists the right way, even a game as unusual as this – rooted equally in the Russian literary tradition and the weirdest speculative fiction – can turn into a kind of gospel.

The mask is far from alien to player-character Artemy Burakh. A native of the game's setting, known only as the Town, he returns after years away training as a surgeon, and upon arrival is accused of patricide. The initial hours are spent avoiding vigilantes convinced of your guilt while chasing leads on the real killer and familiarising yourself with the open map. From the urbanised centre, peopled with characters who wouldn't be out of place in Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, you can journey to the Steppe outback with its native Kin, whose disastrous naïvety in the face of industrialisation have something of Mikhail Sholokhov's peasant class in *And Quiet Flows The Don*. Murder accusation aside, it's a relatively sedate couple of days of in-game time – before an epidemic grips the community, forcing you into an increasingly miserable struggle to keep people alive and find a cure.

That sense of misery is built up through a set of punishing systems that place *Pathologic 2* somewhere between RPG, immersive sim and survival horror. You can fight, barter and trade, pick locks, mend clothes, repair equipment and collect herbs to brew medicine. You administer painkillers in order to apply tinctures to diagnose illnesses and prescribe antibiotics. You can dissect bodies to draw blood or extract organs. Meanwhile you hunger, thirst, get exhausted and lose immunity.

As these systems rub up against one another, they force upon you a mounting sense of compromise. Boosting your own immunity requires using medicine that

could be administered to a patient. Eating to stay alive might deprive you of a valuable bartering commodity. Picking a lock undermines your reputation, even if you ultimately find nothing behind the lock worth taking. All resources are placed within a frugal grid-based inventory, ensuring you can never carry everything you might need at once. Sleeping at any time – including overnight – means forgoing encounters, as you're reminded by the end-of-day warning that "some opportunities have been irreversibly missed". Presented along with a growing toll of the dead and missing, this is more than bleak flavour text. It's a reminder that your choices, even the most seemingly mundane, have permanent consequences.

The game's fine-grained difficulty sliders – a post-launch concession in response to criticisms that *Pathologic 2* was simply too difficult to enjoy – can make these trade-offs more or less manageable. But it's never entirely player-friendly. As your network of acquaintances in the Town grows, as they fall sick, and as your own resources and strength dwindle, you are forced to make increasingly difficult decisions about who to treat, and the world map serves not as a vehicle for icons waiting to be hoovered up, but a monument to your inevitable failures. By the game's end, you'll be lucky to even make it through the final day, wandering infected, malnourished, sleep-deprived and under-equipped to one of four possible conclusions.

Multiple endings are hardly novel in videogames, but in *Pathologic 2* they're emblematic of the game's wider commitment to ambiguity. More than the 'shades of grey' moral choices of more traditional RPGs (though there are plenty of those to be found here, too), ambiguity seems to be an all-encompassing design philosophy for Ice-Pick Lodge, the game's plot points and gameplay systems alike providing a scaffold for the myriad themes it wants to leave open to interpretation.

**Is the epidemic** just an unfortunate outbreak, for instance, or was it deliberately released by your father to cleanse the old social order through fire? Perhaps you brought the disease with you? After all, while the Town's beaked plague doctors are just that, other medics struggling to ►

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contain the outbreak just as often act as heralds of the infection. And there was one of them with you on the train – if you didn't dream it, that is.

It's a philosophical setup, taking in both the epistemologist's suggestion that the things you perceive may not be what they seem even as you are forced to take some perceptions at face value and the Wittgensteinian idea that our lives comprise rule-bound games. And in no small measure, *Pathologic 2* is also a critique of those rules and games. Take the theatre setting where the game begins and closes, and which can be visited at the end of each of its 12 days. Players familiar with Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master And Margarita* may draw a parallel between Satan's magic show at the variety theatre and the Town's theatre director, but its inclusion is more than just a literary nod.



co-exist. Consider the fact that, in the process of defending himself against vigilantes who accuse him of patricide, Burakh kills three Townsfolk. In an instant, he becomes a walking Gettier case: known to be a murderer, but for the wrong reasons, a kind of accidental lining up of the truth and the evidence people have for believing in it.

*Pathologic 2* is full of these wrinkles, a tapestry of possible interpretations that

There is a touch of *Planescape: Torment* in *Pathologic 2*. Combat is clunky, for example, but very rarely forced on you

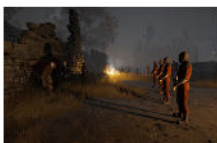
## IT'S A TAPESTRY OF POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS THAT BUILD UP TO INCREASINGLY BIZARRE CONCEPTS

With its suggestion of a fiction within the fiction, *Pathologic 2* stretches – if not outright breaks – the fourth wall between us and the game. Indeed, the very first loading screen notes that “our play begins in the middle of things”. Meanwhile, the director rarely misses an opportunity to remind Burakh that he is quite literally playing a role, erecting a fourth wall of another kind between your character and the rest of the Town. It's yet another example of ambiguity that yields multiple interpretations: a dose of bleak determinism for a man struggling against apparent destiny in the vein of Albert Camus' *The Plague*, perhaps, or a satirical wink at the inherent determinism of a game with multiple but defined endings.

There's a kind of superposition at work throughout the game, as truth and fiction are layered together so closely that both

build up to increasingly bizarre concepts. Arguably the most ambitious of these is also the game's most encompassing. Just as Burakh's patients are divided into three Layers, so key denizens are sorted into the same categories: the Town and Steppe's Bones, Nerves and Blood. Bewildering at first, the metaphor eventually coalesces into the idea that the Town and the Steppe it's built on are living entities as capable of sickness, recovery and renewal as any of Burakh's patients.

In the game's so-called Diurnal Ending, renewal is achieved in part by destroying the Polyhedron, a gravity-defying architectural marvel of twisting geometry that thrusts into the earth like a wounding needle. Its removal is likened to ecological surgery, a grisly application of architectural semiosis that results in a literal outpouring of blood



Performance was poor at launch and remains suboptimal, but that does little to dampen *Pathologic 2*'s worldbuilding

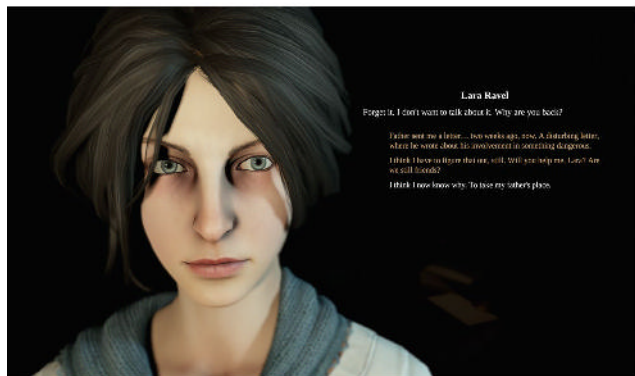




## THREE'S A CROWD

True to its fondness for ambiguity, the game falls between a remake and a reboot of 2005's *Pathologic*. Like the original, it should have had three playable characters (the Haruspex, the Bachelor and the Changeling) to offer different perspectives on the Town's 12 days. Although *Pathologic 2* as it exists never feels incomplete, and the Bachelor and the Changeling are encountered during the game, the Haruspex (Burakh) remains the only playable choice at the time of writing. The consolation prize is *The Marble Nest*: originally a 2016 demo, it was updated and offered as a two-hour standalone expansion in late 2019. Focused on one day of the epidemic from the Bachelor's point of view, it's a reminder of what the game could have been.

Conversations start with a model of your interlocutor and a few voiced lines of flavour text. It's an arresting alternative to text boxes



The Tragedians are an extension of the theatre, acting as either a diegetic tutorial device or a satire of diegetic tutorials, depending on your interpretation

from the ground. It's moot whether this amounts to healing the Steppe, but it's left in the care of its children all the same.

The Town's children, with their creepy games and frequently unfathomable customs, have a sense of mystery redolent of Mariam Petrosyan's *The Gray House* (a novel that was published *after* the original *Pathologic*, of which this is as much remake as sequel – see 'Three's a crowd'). How to characterise a group with the ability – make-believe or real, it's never clear – to converse with the dead or summon trains? Ultimately, however, these children are the Town's conscience, innocence and future. After so much misery, their new inheritance gives the ending an uncharacteristically hopeful note of peace.

**Time has lent** new meaning to *Pathologic 2*'s arguably esoteric literary themes, passing them through the exoteric

filter of the pandemic, but it has done the same for the game's specifically Russian elements. While the (undefined) but seemingly early 20th-century setting is most likely based on the Russian Civil War, its contours are indeterminate enough to speak to the conditions of other military conflicts – and Burakh's alienation from the Town in which he grew up feels especially relevant in the wake of Russian emigration sparked by the war in Ukraine.

Burakh returns after years away, not quite a stranger but not at ease either. He remembers some of the Town's traditions – but can, depending on your decisions, find many nonsensical or even savage. The Townsfolk do not dig holes, for example, something which Burakh can either embrace or ridicule. The native Steppe language, meanwhile, comes back to him slowly, the vocabulary dependent entirely on whether you choose to learn and use it. And in turn Burakh is met with alternating resentment, envy, and hope; some even claim he was sent away so he could better love the Town. These should be familiar sentiments to any member of the Russian diaspora, for whom the concepts of motherland and homecoming are at best uncertain and bittersweet. In that sense, *Pathologic 2*'s ambiguities can be comfortably familiar. Its hauntingly cohesive vision of a strange place healing from a great sickness has a newfound universality, but, like the Town's murmuring tree roots, it whispers more to some players than others. ■





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66

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# T H E L O N G G A M E

A progress report on the games we just can't quit



## Ghostwire: Tokyo

Developer Tango Gameworks Publisher Bethesda Softworks Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series Release 2022

One of Shinji Mikami's goals for Tango Gameworks was to give a younger generation of developers chance to shine. The studio has already delivered on that promise this year with the effervescent rhythm-action of *Hi-Fi Rush*, and now, following a year of console exclusivity on PS5, *Ghostwire Tokyo* has landed on Xbox Series in better shape than ever. It's fitting that the most substantial new story quest here takes place in a school, since this expanded version offers ample proof that Mikami's students have learned plenty from their departing mentor.

This multi-part mission delivers a few good frights: like the mannequins in *Resident Evil Village's* *Shadows Of Rose* DLC, an anatomical model pursues you through the darkened classrooms and hallways of this haunted school, advancing in rapid, jerky steps whenever you're not looking directly at it. Then follows an extended sequence where it flips that idea on its head, as you try to sneak around a demonic schoolgirl who damages you whenever you *do* make eye contact. It's enough to send a chill up your spine, as you follow the clues left by an afterschool club that has evidently learned the hard way that it's unwise to meddle with the paranormal.

That hasn't, however, put off Tango's tinkerers: the Spider's Thread mode from which the new update takes its name sees the game remixed into Roguelike form. Here, the city is split into 30 'floors' with portals taking you between layers of urban space tangled up in thick

webbing, limiting the explorable area to a couple of blocks or so. Each segment tasks you with completing a specific goal — from eliminating enemies to protecting spirits to gliding through torii gates against the clock — with side objectives to boost your gained experience.

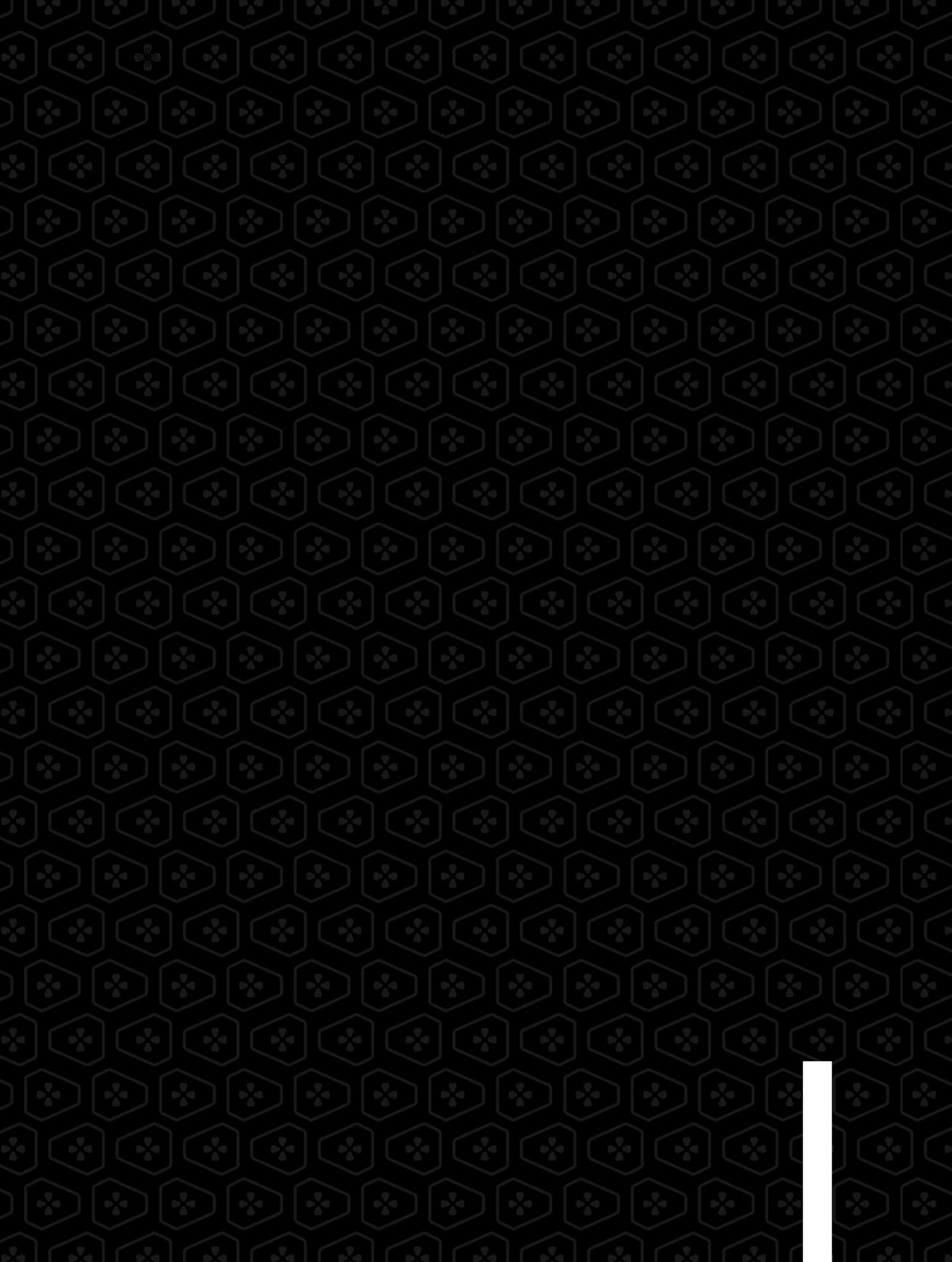
It's bolstered by a raft of new combat options: though awkwardly mapped to L3, a new lateral dodge is welcome, not least with new mermaid enemies that swim beneath the asphalt, and floating dancers with multiple blade-wielding arms protruding from their blood-red cloaks. These encourage you to master the perfect block, which can be followed up with a shockwave to stagger or knock down nearby Visitors, while powerful 'charge rush' moves turn your elemental weaves into a flamethrower, an AOE freeze attack or rapid-fire wind bullets. New ground-pound and air-purge attacks give you further encouragement to stick to the rooftops, which are easier than ever to reach quickly: whenever those squawking tengu aren't around to grapple to, you can deploy a talisman that generates a powerful updraught.

Even with this expanded arsenal, the threat of lost progress lends extra tension to encounters you'd previously have muddled through without a twinge of fear. And we suspect Microsoft won't exactly be disheartened to learn that these changes make for a better first campaign playthrough than PS5 owners enjoyed on the game's original release last year. ■



**#386**  
June 15







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